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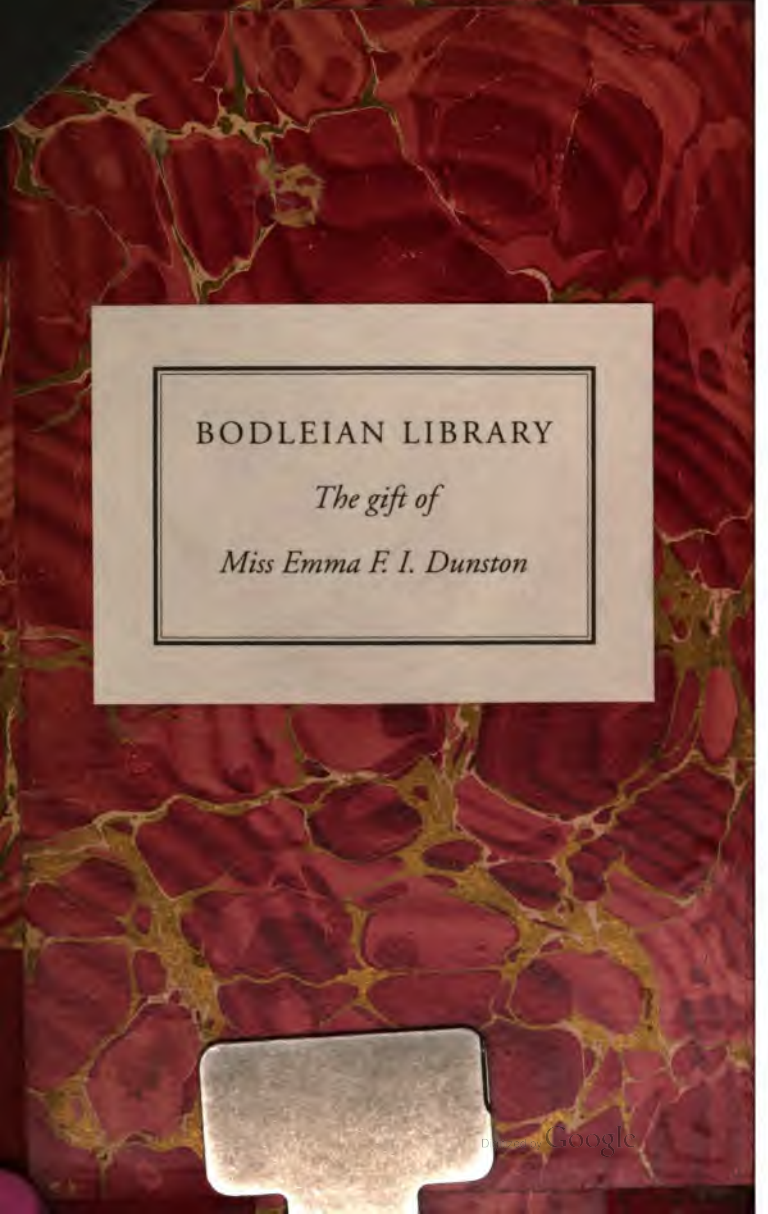
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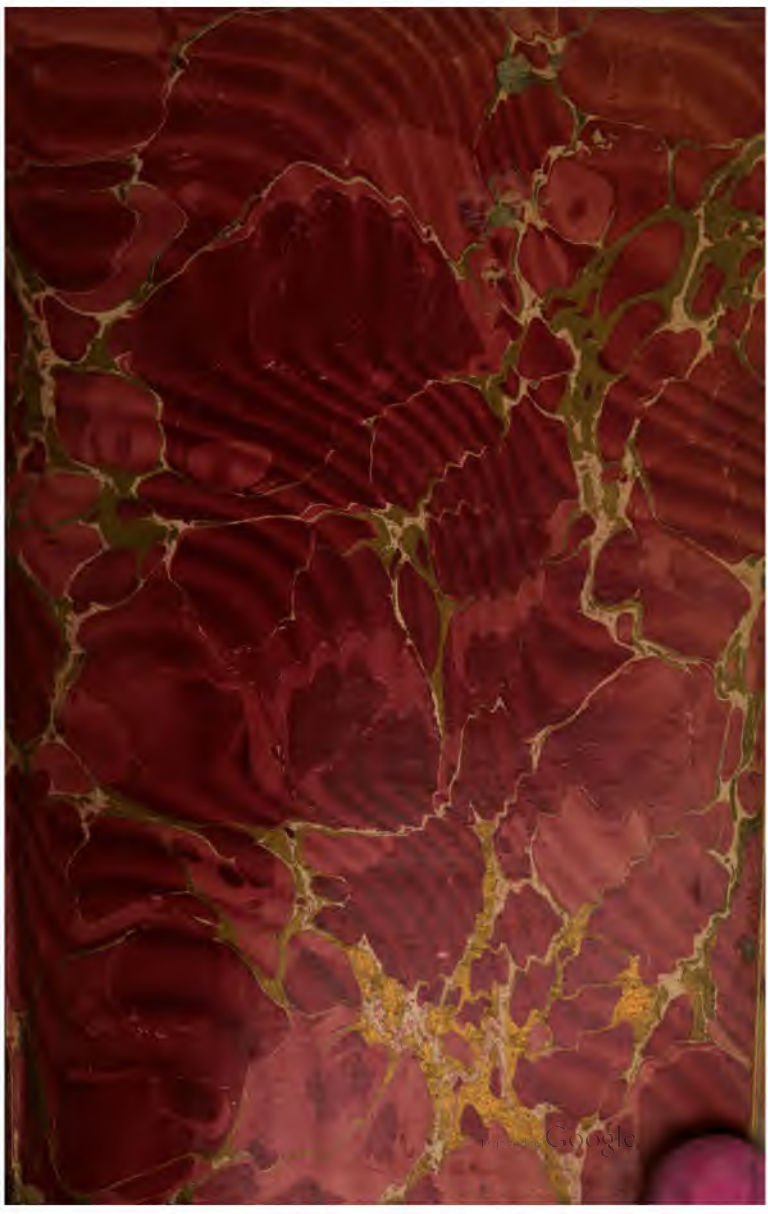
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MARTHA BROWN, THE HEIRESS.

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MARTHA BROWN,

THE HEIRESS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'DOROTHY.'

'*Suffer love:* A good epithet! I do suffer love, indeed, for I love thee against my will . . . . Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably.'—*Much Ado About Nothing.*

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1861.

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MARTHA BROWN, THE HEIRESS.

CHAPTER I.

IT was Christmas time—marked in one of the old-fashioned houses of Bedford-square by two sprays of holly which decked the ormolu chandeliers, on either side of the mirror. There was no Christmas merry-making, none of the deeper joy of a family gathering, in the little party assembled there. One feeble, paralytic old man sat in his easy chair, his head half dropped upon his breast, and his only companion was a girl, or woman: for hers were not the form and features of extreme youth, who leaned her head upon her hand, and looked dreamily at the fire.

'Ah, well,' said the old man, rousing himself from an uneasy sleep, 'I shall not live to see another Christmas.'

His niece looked up, and did not make

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merely a silent assent. 'I do not think you will,' she said, after a pause.

'That is so like you, Martha. Mrs. Jenkins, Jen, or whatever you call the old woman, always plagues me by saying how much better I look, and that the spring is to set me up, when she knows as well as you do that I am breaking fast.'

'Every one must see it,' said Martha; 'and besides, I had a talk with Mr. Arnold this morning.'

'Oh, you had?' And although a moment before the old man had spoken so calmly of approaching death, there was some fretful impatience in his tone. 'What did Arnold say?'

'He said,' answered Martha, steadily, yet not without feeling, 'that the end might come soon and suddenly; and that you ought to know it.'

'Arnold knows his man,' said Mr. Brown. 'I am not such a fool as to be frightened by what we all know must come sooner or later. And, after all, it is time I should make room for others. I have made the money, and it is your turn to spend it; eh, Martha?'

An expression of scorn and grief flitted across Martha's face, and she made no direct reply.

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'Mr. Arnold said that I should tell you of your state, Uncle Oliver, so that you might set your house in order.'

'Very obliging of Arnold; but I have no intention of making a codicil in his favour. As you know, Martha, my will was signed and sealed long ago. I have left everything to you, tied up and strictly in your own power, whether you die married or single. I am sure that old Benson will do his duty as trustee, though you would not have his son, for he loves to handle money, whether it be his own or no.'

'Mr. Arnold was not thinking of your money,' said Martha, with kindling eyes. 'There are other things to think of before a man meets death; and though you say you are not afraid, there is a wide difference between the calm courage of a man, and the indifference of a brute.'

'And I am no better than the brute?' said the old man, with a feeble chuckle. It seemed as if his niece could say nothing to displease him.

'I have said enough, perhaps too much,' replied Martha; 'indeed, I told Mr. Arnold that he had better speak to you himself, for I felt it would be a mockery to bring religion

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before you now, when you have lived your life without it.'

'Very right, my dear. Your practical sense is always refreshing; and Arnold had better mind his business as a doctor, and not spoil it by preaching.'

'You do not doubt his sincerity?' said Martha.

'Perhaps not that he has a sincere regard for his own interest. Preaching is not a bad way of ingratiating himself with young ladies, heiresses or otherwise.'

Another disdainful glance flashed from Martha's eyes, and she remained silent, impatiently opening and closing the snap of her heavy gold bracelet.

'You will not defend your hero,' said Mr. Brown.

'No,' rejoined Martha; 'because I honour Mr. Arnold too much to bring him into such a discussion. You have done your best to infuse into my nature the suspicion of low and unworthy motives; and I admit that the set in which we live justifies your cynicism tolerably well. But I like to believe that I know one man who lives for others and not for himself.'

'At all events, you will give up such belief

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if he proposes to live for the heiress of 20,000*l.* a year.'

Hot and angry tears stood in Martha's eyes, and her uncle was instantly softened.

'I did not mean to vex you, my dear; it is odd that we can never touch upon the subject of your marriage without quarrelling. But it grieves me to think of your lonely life when I am gone. There is old Jen, indeed, but she is no better than a fool, and you may be driven from that into marrying the first adventurer who asks you.'

'He will certainly be an adventurous man who does ask me,' said Martha, smiling a little. 'You know very well, Uncle Oliver, that except in that Benson affair, which was purely a mercantile transaction between you and his father, no one has been courageous enough to make the attempt. You have taught me to be so afraid of being married for my fortune, that I have repelled all who tried to know me: and yet I might be as other women; I might love and be loved, were it not for this miserable money.'

'This miserable money!' Mr. Brown repeated, with the caustic vigour which still triumphed over his bodily weakness. 'It strikes me,

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Martha, that you have as good an appreciation of the luxury and power of riches as any one I know.'

'After a fashion. If I had been born poor, I should now be free and independent.'

'It is a new idea that independence belongs to poverty. I did not think myself my own master until I was making a clear 5000*l.* a year, and perhaps not then.'

'True, perhaps not then,' repeated Martha. 'In some form or another, I suppose, slavery is a condition of life, certainly of women's life.'

'You have not found me a hard master, I hope?' said the old man. And Martha drew down the trembling hand he laid on her head, and pressed it to her lips, as she answered:

'No, Uncle Oliver, you have indulged me too much; and when you are gone, there will be no one left to love me for my own sake.'

Any expression of feeling between these two was so rare, that Mr. Brown started almost guiltily as he observed that 'there was old Jen pottering upstairs.' And when Mrs. Jenkins entered, who had been formerly Martha's governess, and was now her duenna, the two were sitting apart as before.

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CHAPTER II.

'MY dear,' said Mrs. Erle, in the slightly aggrieved tone in which a wife convicts her husband of such an omission; 'my dear, you never told me that you saw Miss Brown.'

'No, I forgot all about it,' Mr. Erle replied, from the writing-table at which he was engaged. 'I was absent at tea time, working out my sermon. In five minutes I shall be at your service.' And the pen, suspended between his fingers for a moment, was soon travelling over the paper as busily as before.

'Who told you, mamma?' said a fair, slight girl of seventeen, raising her head from her work with awakened interest.

'Elias Hopkins. He did not know that your father intended to go to the station himself to ask about the flour, so he took the cart there, and I found him in the kitchen just now, quite full of the event. The train came up while he was there, and Miss Brown got out, with such a quantity of luggage and servants.'

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'Yes, she certainly means to do things in style,' observed Mr. Erle, drawing his pen under the last word of his sermon with a triumphant dash, to signify that his labours were completed. 'She drove off in an uncommonly pretty carriage, with a pair of greys; and her dress, although plain and of course in deep mourning, gave me an impression of costliness, but I could scarcely say in what it consisted.'

'And what is she like, papa? Is she pretty?' asked Helen Erle.

'Certainly not pretty; some people might call her handsome, for the upper part of the face is very striking. She has a low broad forehead, and strongly marked eyebrows, rather too much colour, and the expression of the mouth is not pleasing. She is the sort of person, Amy, whom I could fancy your taking in great aversion.'

'Oh, I hope not,' said Mrs. Erle. 'I quite intend her to be an acquisition. It has been a loss to the parish in many ways to have no resident Squire, and now we shall have a lady of the manor for our charities. The clothing club is in sad arrears.'

'It remains to be seen,' observed Mr. Erle,

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'whether she accepts the duties of proprietorship, since she only holds Elwood on a long lease. It puzzled me why the heiress, reputed to be of such enormous wealth, should have no place of her own; but it seems that it was a whim of the old uncle from whom she inherits it, that the money he made in the City should still remain there, invested in the various concerns which had proved so successful under his management; and there is a clause in his will forbidding the purchase of land. In his lifetime, they lived all the year round in London; and as soon as it was decent to do so after his death, Miss Brown began to look about for a country place, and soon decided to take Elwood. She certainly may feel secure of possession as long as young Bertram lives, for even if he ceases to be an outlaw, he can never afford to live here.'

'Do you think that I shall like her, papa?' asked Helen, anxiously.

'It is impossible to predict the caprices of young-lady friendship, Helen; but I feel nearly certain that she will not like you. In the first place, she must be twice your age. She looks thirty, at the very least.'

'Oh, no!' said the mother and daughter in

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concert; and Mrs. Erle adduced the evidence of the agent for the estate that she was only two-and-twenty.

'Well,' said Mr. Erle, 'I suppose Trelawney knows; but Helen would look like a child beside her. It is a grave, severe face; not unwomanly, and yet scarcely feminine. I admired her perfect command of the reins when the horses plunged at the whistle of the engine, but I would rather have seen them in a man's hand.'

'I suppose she is alone?' said Mrs. Erle. 'Mr. Trelawney says that she has not a relation in the world, now that her uncle is dead.'

'No; and as the old man had been paralytic for the last two years of his life, she must be accustomed to act for herself. A meek little duenna followed her into the carriage, looking horribly afraid of the prancing horses.'

'Her name is Martha—Martha Brown,' said Helen, thoughtfully.

'Helen thinks that she has the best of it there,' rejoined her father, laughing. 'Certainly it is a plebeian combination, but she looks like a lady notwithstanding. She is very tall, and moves with a stately graciousness.'

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'Papa is quite impressed,' said Mrs. Erle, mischievously.

'Yes; but not favourably impressed. She is clearly one of those persons whom one must either like or dislike strongly, and I am inclined to the latter alternative.' And after this satisfactory dish of gossip the family subsided into their several occupations.

There was a stir in the little congregation next morning when Miss Brown came into church. Helen Erle, in the intervals of admonitory glances at the children of her Sunday class for turning round to stare at the stranger, found time to make her own observations, and lost nothing of the altercation between Miss Brown and the old man in a brown wig, who had officiated as clerk and pew-opener for the last two generations. He assiduously motioned her into the great Elwood pew which blocked up half the chancel, while Miss Brown with equal pertinacity declined the invitation, and finally inserted herself between two of the school children on an open bench. Helen permitted herself one glance more, and decided that her father was justified in believing that she could have little in common with the owner of that striking face; a face of power

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rather than of beauty. With a sigh of disappointment Helen relinquished certain bright and unformed visions of some release from the routine of home and parish duties. She sometimes grew weary of teaching her younger brothers and sisters, of visiting the farmers' wives, and of reading to old men and women; and although she did not wish to go out into the world in search of dissipation, she had indulged a hope that the dissipation might have come to their doors.

The low, rambling parsonage was within a stone's throw of the church, and Mr. Erle entered the drawing-room very soon after his family.

'Well,' he said, energetically, 'I hope you appreciated that protest against square pews. On the strength of it, I introduced myself to the lady, and asked her to come in to luncheon.'

'Oh, did you?' said Mrs. Erle. We have nothing but a potato pie, which will only just dine us.'

'You may set your mind at rest, Amy. She declined luncheon, preferring to roam about on the common between services. To-morrow you must call at the great house.'

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'How did you like her manner, papa?' said Helen.

'It is forcible, like her dress and appearance, but not disagreeable. She hoped that we were not scandalized by her refusal to sit in that red box, and I assured her I was delighted. She is to give orders to have it swept away before next Sunday; and if Trelawney demurs, she will engage to put it up again when her lease expires. She is clever enough to know that if an abuse is suspended for seven years, the most narrow-minded conservatism will hardly urge its restoration, so that it is an immense triumph over Farmer Lee.'

'She looks very clever and decided,' said Helen.

'Yes; I foresee that it will be necessary to brush up my theology: she was dreadfully bored by my sermon.'

'Did she say so?' said Mrs. Erle, considering that this was carrying decision alarmingly far.

'No; but I could tell it by her face. Pippin was not particularly amused,' Mr. Erle added, catching up the round, red-faced boy, whose sleepy eyes were not yet fully open.

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'It was so very long, papa,' said Pippin, apologetically.

After dinner a portion remained, which Helen offered to take to an old man on the common; and Pippin was elated by the permission to carry the basket. It was a pleasant walk, across wild open ground, overgrown with gorse and heather, and varied by clumps of natural fir-wood, smelling sweet in the soft spring air. But the walk home was not so pleasant; for Pippin was tired, or said that he was tired, so that the church bells began to ring before they reached the descent into the village hollow.

'Do walk fast, Pippin; we shall be late,' Helen urged, as she took hold of his hand.

'I *am* walking fast,' said Pippin, holding back more resolutely than before.

'Shall I carry him?' said a voice behind them; and Helen turned round and saw that Miss Brown had overtaken their lagging steps. Before Helen could reply or Pippin remonstrate, the child was in her arms, and his weight did not oblige her to slacken her pace.

'Let me down,' said Pippin, resenting the indignity.

'Not unless you promise to walk fast. If

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you will not walk like a man, you must be carried like a baby.'

'Let me down; I will run,' said Pippin; and accordingly he was no sooner released than he set off at a round trot, his pace quickened by the conviction that all nursery legends concerning the feats of giantesses might otherwise be verified on his own small person. Helen longed to follow his example, since the prospect of keeping company with Miss Brown until they reached the church porch was not a little alarming. However, the necessity of vindicating Pippin's character constrained her to speak.

'William is generally very good, but he gets tired by the long morning service, and that makes him cross.'

'At his age he would be better at home,' said Martha.

'It is more convenient to the servants when we can take him,' said Helen, colouring.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Erle. I did not mean to be so impertinent as to criticize your family arrangements. I was speaking in the abstract, or rather perhaps with a particular view to my own case, and my weary recollections of early church-going in London. My

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governess and I were the sole inhabitants of a square pew with red curtains and huge hassocks, built in by monuments; and there was a marble cherub blowing a trumpet, who still visits me in nightmares. You must not imagine that my dislike to square pews is based on Church principles.'

'Papa is not a very high churchman,' said Helen, looking wistfully at the old steeple, which seemed to be receding instead of growing more distinct. She wished that Pippin, or William, as she now correctly called him, would trip, and give her an excuse for running after him.

'The smell of the pines is so fresh and aromatic,' said Martha, walking briskly on, with her head a little thrown back to inhale the fragrance; 'I think I shall like this place. Do you, Miss Erle?'

'Oh, yes; we have always lived here,' said Helen.

'Yes; but that does not involve the affirmative: for I have always lived in Bedford-square, without learning even to tolerate it.'

'There is the surplice-bell,' said Helen, uneasily; 'that means that papa has gone into the vestry.'

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'Never mind, we shall still be in time if you take my arm. It is clear,' Martha added, unceremoniously yet not uncivilly, 'that you have adapted yourself to that small boy's pace so long that you do not know what fast walking is. Does the family consist of you and him, and the two little girls I saw in church?'

'And two brothers at school; I am the eldest,' said Helen. But she felt very young at that moment, and not at all disposed to resent these direct inquiries.

The little bell rang its last stroke as they entered the porch, and Helen dropped Martha's arm and went to her own seat, rather flushed, and almost as breathless as Pippin, who had panted in the minute before them, still swinging his basket, and so much excited by the adventure that he could not refrain from whispering some particulars of it to his sister Rose. Martha followed, perfectly cool and fresh, and she again gratified Mr. Erle by selecting an open sitting, overshadowed by the pew of his recalcitrant churchwarden, Farmer Lee. The peculiarities of their new neighbour were the subject of an animated discussion at the parsonage that evening.

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CHAPTER III.

ON the following day Mr. and Mrs. Erle decided that it would be necessary to make their formal visit to Miss Brown, and since Helen was to accompany them, she tied her bonnet strings with unusual care, and lingered before the glass to judge of the effect, until her father's voice summoned her down stairs.

'Always behind,' said Mr. Erle, and Helen acquiesced in the reproof with placid good-humour, for she did not care to disturb her established reputation as the dawdle of the family.

Mrs. Erle had also a remark to make.

'I think, my dear, your other bonnet would have done. The clouds are threatening, and if that pink ribbon is spotted—'

'Never mind,' said Mr. Erle, tucking his wife's arm under his own; 'I cannot afford to wait all day while she is changing her finery, and if Helen is improvident enough to spoil her best bonnet, she can always fall back upon her worst.'

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'Or persuade papa to buy her a new one,' said Mrs. Erle, but she made no further protest, and they set out at once. Mrs. Erle heaved a gentle sigh of regret as they passed the coach-house door, where stood the pony-carriage, disused since the boys were sent to school, and it had been found expedient to dismiss the groom and sell the pony.

'Never mind, Amy,' said Mr. Erle, who, though sufficiently obtuse to the thoughts of others, could discern and make allowance for all that passed through his wife's mind; 'when the boys are started in life, we may be able to set up our carriage again, and meanwhile, I believe a walk across the common will do you good.'

'And if Miss Brown is at home, and sees that you are tired, she may offer to send us back in the carriage,' said Helen.

'So that is the motive for the pink ribbons,' said Mr. Erle; 'you think they will be more in keeping with the prancing greys.'

'I thought I ought to put on my best bonnet to pay a first visit,' said Helen; and as her tone was slightly aggrieved, the subject fell to the ground.

'Miss Brown was particularly engaged,' the

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servant said, in reply to Mr. Erle's inquiry if she were at home, and since fatigue as well as curiosity prompted a desire for admission, the reply was very unwelcome.

'She will not conciliate the neighbourhood if she adopts that method of avoiding their first visits,' Mr. Erle observed.

'We must find a place to sit down as soon as we are out of sight of the drawing-room windows,' added Mrs. Erle, plaintively.

Before, however, they could retrace their steps, Miss Brown's voice was heard in the hall; 'Oh, if it is the Erles, let them in,' and accordingly the servant retracted the inhospitable message.

'I *am* particularly engaged,' said Miss Brown, herself coming forward; 'my hands are too dirty to shake, for Jen and I rashly undertook to classify the books in the library, and after working at them the whole day, we have thrown everything into hopeless confusion. Come in, however; Jen will enjoy a respite from her labours.'

Mrs. Erle complied, not a little bewildered by such a reception. Miss Brown's deep mourning was plain in shape and material; her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, displaying

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a rounded hand and arm, rather large for feminine beauty, and soiled, as she herself had said, by exertions which had also disordered her hair, and added a flush to colour naturally high. If she had known what was 'due to herself,' as an heiress and a new comer, she would have been found sitting in state in the grand drawing-room, prepared to receive the first visits of her neighbours.

Miss Brown, apparently unconscious that anything was amiss, led the way into the library, a long room, divided by pillars, and called 'Jen,' who came forward to be introduced under the more formal appellation of Mrs. Jenkins. She was a meek little woman, with a pleasing manner, and Mrs. Erle silently wished her in the place of the lawful mistress of the house, whom she regarded with alarm and aversion. Helen and her father were, however, less unfavourably impressed, and Mrs. Erle herself was conciliated when Martha cleared away the pile of heavy folios from the broad leathern sofa, and insisted that Mrs. Erle should put up her feet and take a good rest.

'You look tired by your walk,' she said, 'and need the refreshment of a cup of tea as

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much as Jen and I, who have had no time to think of luncheon. If you are going to order tea, Jen, just say that the carriage must be ready to come round when I want it. Mrs. Erle will let me drive her home, and I shall enjoy a breath of fresh air after inhaling dust for so many hours.'

Mrs. Erle thanked her, and Helen avoided her father's eye, conscious that he was telegraphing to her that the pink ribbons were not worn in vain.

'The only result of your exertions,' Mr. Erle remarked, 'will be that these books must be left for the housemaid to put up in worse order than they were before.'

'Very likely,' said Miss Brown; 'Jen can testify how often I have lost my temper this morning, in despair of making any satisfactory classification.'

'If Uncle Ambrose were here,' said Helen, addressing her father, rather than Miss Brown, who, however, did not let the observation pass.

'And who is Uncle Ambrose?'

'Ambrose Arnold, a brother of my wife's, and a great hero in the family,' said Mr. Erle; 'you may expect to hear his authority quoted on all occasions.'

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'Oh!' said Martha, 'I have heard that Mr. Arnold came from this part of the world, but not that he was a connexion of yours. He attended my uncle for the last three months of his life.'

'I had no idea of that,' said Mrs. Erle, quite excited by the intelligence; 'how odd that Ambrose should never have mentioned it.'

'Not at all. There is no one who observes more rigidly the rule of not gossiping about his patients,' rejoined Mr. Erle. 'And how did you like him, Miss Brown? I cannot make out why such a clever young fellow cannot get a better start; but his practice seems to lie almost exclusively among the poor, which of course involves a larger outgoing than income.'

'I believe it is his own fault, or merit; at least, so my uncle used to say,' replied Martha; 'his skill is generally admitted, but he refuses to be bound by ordinary rules. He was visiting surgeon to some London hospital, and my uncle was on the committee, and one of those who enforced his resignation on the ground of his transgressing the rules of the hospital, and affording the patients undue indulgences. Yet at the same time, my uncle so much ad-

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mired the manly straightforwardness with which Mr. Arnold sacrificed his interest to his principles, that he sent for him in his last illness, and would have no further advice. Once or twice, however, they fell out, from my uncle's inability to instil the maxims of worldly wisdom which he considered essential to success in life.'

'Poor Ambrose!' said Mrs. Erle. 'I am convinced he never will succeed in any profession. He chose medicine, chiefly as a scope for a high and disinterested career, but he was always unpractical, and aimed too high.'

Before Mrs. Erle took leave, Martha made a proposal which Helen scarcely knew whether to receive with dismay or pleasure.

'Jen and I look forward with alarm to the first visits of the neighbourhood,' she said; 'and Miss Erle's presence would be a great protection, as she could help us to their natural history, and save us the trouble of deciding whom to like and dislike.'

'Oh, we are very benevolent, and like everyone in this neighbourhood,' said Mr. Erle, to whom the decision was referred by wife and daughter; 'but you are quite welcome to Helen, if she likes to stay—eh, Helen?'

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'Yes, papa,' she said, colouring, and thinking that the pleasure would have been greater if there had been time to prepare an evening dress. But she was partly reassured by another glance at Martha's crumpled collar.

In the evening, however, Martha appeared more in the character of heiress in her rich black velvet. She was certainly striking, if not regularly handsome, when well dressed, as now, and seen by candle-light, which toned down her complexion, while it gave additional brilliancy to her dark and deep-set eyes. They dined in great state, which did not tend to restore Helen's ease of mind; and the profusion of light, the silver plate, and the attendance, certainly justified Mr. Brown's assertion that his niece loved the luxury of riches, although the taste was not consistently carried out. Even now Helen remarked that she ate sparingly, and only drank water, and it was left for Mrs. Jenkins to do justice to the entrées, at which Helen looked with anxious curiosity, hoping to carry back to her mother some hints respecting their composition.

In the course of the evening Helen again quoted 'Uncle Ambrose,' and Martha inquired if he ever came down to the parsonage.

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'He has promised us two days at Easter; that will be in less than a fortnight,' replied Helen, colouring with pleasure; 'and then papa means to try and persuade him to settle in this neighbourhood. He thinks he might get into practice after a time, and he is sure that his health would stand the country work better. But Uncle Ambrose is unwilling to give up London.'

'I know he and my uncle had many arguments on that point. My uncle used to warn him that he was wearing out mind and body by the life he led, and he accused him of courting martyrdom.'

'You do not seem to have understood Uncle Ambrose in the very least,' said Helen, with spirit, which, however, evaporated before the conclusion of the sentence, and left her in alarm at her own daring.

'Do not imagine that I endorsed all my uncle's sentiments; *au contraire,*' said Martha, smiling; 'but so far I admit that I certainly did not understand him. However, I know already as much about him as you can tell me, and I should like to hear of those I do not know. In spite of your father's theory of universal benevolence, I suppose there *are*

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people to like and dislike in this neighbourhood.'

'Yes,' said Helen, cautiously; 'but papa seemed to think it would not be fair to prejudice you, and we really know no one very intimately. I dare say several families will call on you whom we only know by sight. Still I can tell you who are married and dead, if that will be of any use.'

'The last information will be especially useful, if I may expect complimentary visits from their ghosts,' replied Martha, while Helen again shrank into her shell, and felt that Miss Brown was alarmingly satirical.

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CHAPTER IV.

IT was on Easter Eve, a fortnight after the arrival at Elwood Manor, that Ambrose Arnold opened the wicket of the parsonage garden, startling Pippin from his peaceful retirement in the ditch, where he was engaged in making dirt-pies. At first startled by the interruption, he greeted 'Uncle Ambrose' with joyful alacrity—aware from former experience that he was more apt to lead than to check him in the pursuit of mischief; and Ambrose submitted with good humour to a rapturous hug, which left the print of five clayey fingers on his shoulder.

'Such nice clay!' said Pippin, drawing attention to the sticky substance with which he was smeared; 'we can make some jolly pies, now you have come.'

'Are the boys not here to assist you in the manufacture?' said Ambrose.

'They have come home,' replied Pippin, disconsolately, 'but they are so old and stupid, they will not play with me. They care

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for nothing but fishing with the Elwood keeper.'

'I thought it was your voice,' said Mrs. Erle, stepping out of the drawing-room window on to the lawn. 'My dear Ambrose, how ill you look!'

'Only rather jaded, Amy. Three days of country air will do wonders for me.' And Ambrose balanced himself on the window-sill and breathed the sweet spring air, as though weariness itself were pleasant. His was a face which at once aroused attention, not from any regularity of feature, but from its fine and ever-varying expression. The fair and ruddy complexion, the yellow hair, which was so intractable in its wavy curls, and his light-blue eyes, gave him a boyish air, which was, however, partly counteracted by the lower part of the face, and especially by the mouth, for it had lost the pliability of youth, and was firmly set, as of one who had thought and suffered much. In manner, also, there was the same inconsistency,—great natural buoyancy, often checked by a sad earnestness. Just now it seemed that his spirits were only subdued by bodily languor, and he entered eagerly into every detail of local interest, including, of course, the sayings and doings of the new neighbour at Elwood.

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'You never told us that you had known her, and attended her uncle in Bedford-square,' said Mrs. Erle.

'No; I did not wish to interfere with your first impressions.'

'Our impressions are still rather vague. Helen and her father like her better than I do, and the boys are delighted because she has not restricted their old privileges of ranging over the manor. She is certainly good-natured, though rather strong-minded.'

'I dislike her particularly,' said Ambrose, swinging himself from the window-sill on to his feet, in order to deliver his opinion with greater energy. 'She is a hard, overbearing woman, with all the pride of riches, which is even more offensive than the pride of birth.'

'I should not call her proud,' replied Mrs. Erle; 'she is rather brusque and downright, but perfectly friendly. And I am sorry you have taken her in aversion, for she and Mr. Erle have been concocting a little scheme between them which would keep you in this neighbourhood.'

'Not as her private physician?' said Mr. Arnold; 'the temptation to poison her within a week might prove too strong for my weak nature.'

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'My dear Ambrose,' rejoined the elder sister, reproachfully, 'you ruin all your prospects in life by talking in that reckless manner.'

'Especially when there is a small pitcher at hand to carry the saying away,' observed Ambrose, pointing to Pippin, who had opened his round eyes with a frightened chuckle, and now said indignantly that he should never tell Miss Brown.

'I should tell her myself, if she offered me the post,' said Mr. Arnold. 'But what *is* the scheme, Amy?'

'You know the brick-fields on Hedworth Moor. Now there are some tile-works, and the hamlet is so much increased, and in such an outlying place, that William hopes some day to see it made into a separate district. In the meanwhile, their most pressing need is for a doctor, and the men have agreed to pay one so much a week out of their earnings; and Miss Brown proposes to add to this what is necessary to make up a decent subsistence.'

'Hedworth Moor is a sufficiently dreary abode,' said Ambrose.

'Yes; but it is within reach of pretty country, barely four miles across the common

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here. Still, I feel as unwilling as you can be, that you should bury yourself in an out-of-the-way country village, if there was the smallest prospect of your making a good start in London.'

'I have plenty to do in London, Amy, and do not feel quite sure that I should be justified in giving it up; only, unfortunately, one cannot live for ever on work without pay, and old Oliver Brown was my first and last paying patient since I threw up the hospital. Some doctors think matters have come to a bad pass when they are forced to put down their carriage; but I have been seriously thinking of putting down my cat.'

'Putting down your cat?' repeated Pippin, with a puzzled air.

'Yes, Master Pippin; putting her down to dance on a hot plate, shod with walnut-shells.'

'Oh, Uncle Ambrose!'

'Run away, child; I did not know you were still here,' said Mrs. Erle, a little annoyed, while Ambrose laughed at the mystified face which Pippin carried back to his dirt-pies.

'The worst is,' continued Mrs. Erle, 'that you will be in the same plight wherever you go, if you are so unpractical. At Hedworth,

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now, you may take some absurd fancy for refusing the men's pay.'

'Not impossibly; but it is still more likely that I shall refuse to be beholden to Miss Brown.'

'*Are* you serious, Ambrose?'

'As serious as it is possible to be when I have come down to the country for a three days' holiday, of which I wish to make the most.'

'And at the end of the three days you will go back to starve in your London garret.'

'*Che sarà, sarà,*' said Ambrose, with a smile which destroyed his sister's remaining stock of patience.

'That sentiment would come better from the mouth of a Turk than from one who professes to be better than his neighbours.'

'That is the severest thing you have said yet, Amy—making me into a Turk and a Pharisee in the same breath. But leave me in peace to-night, and I will consider the matter, and talk it over with William, and then come to some conclusion.'

Mrs. Erle must at all events have agreed to let the discussion drop, for Helen and her brothers came in, and had much to say to their

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uncle Ambrose. The sayings and doings of Miss Brown were, as before, the chief subject of interest. John and Richard pronounced her 'a splendid whip;' and Helen added that, though sometimes alarming, she was really very good-natured.

'And what says the neighbourhood in general?' inquired Mr. Arnold.

'They are all in suspense,' said Helen. 'As far as I know, the farmers like her better than the farmers' wives; and Miss Needham shakes her flaxen curls and says, "Really, now, Miss Helen, I don't feel altogether sure and certain that she is quite the lady."'

Miss Needham kept the village post-office, was the oracle of the small community, and the centre of all gossip; and Ambrose laughed as he observed that he had not given her credit for so much discernment.

'Oh, really, Uncle Ambrose, she is odd, but not at all vulgar.'

'Not in manners, Helen; but rather vulgar-minded.'

'Miss Brown was more discreet, and did not betray that you had quarrelled,' observed Mrs. Erle. 'What was it about?'

'Everything and nothing. It can only be

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defined as antagonism, for there was no subject on which we thought alike. Yet I shall be rather glad to see her again, although we are sure to fall out before we have been five minutes in the room together!'

Mr. Erle was the only one missing from the family party; and when he came in, rather late for dinner, it appeared that he had been to Hedworth Moor with Miss Brown, to select the house most suitable for the new doctor. Mrs. Erle found a moment to tell her husband that she had unfolded the scheme to Ambrose, who had not finally rejected it; and when the others had retired to bed, Mr. Erle at once entered on the subject.

'I do not say that the prospect is very inviting,' he said, 'but the provision, though small, is certain, and the very miseries of the place will have its attractions for you. Only it is misery more squalid than picturesque. New, ill-built houses, and half-made roads, all set down on that bleak bit of Moor without plan or purpose. I pointed out to Miss Brown that there were two public-houses and neither church nor school; and she said, in her odd way, that we also had souls to be saved, and yet thought it necessary to eat and drink.'

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'That is just like her,' said Ambrose, indignantly; 'she makes a parade of false and shallow-hearted cynicism. I feel that it would be quite impossible for me to have anything to do with a place of which she is owner.'

'In your own province,' replied Mr. Erle, 'I am convinced you might go all lengths. She takes great interest in the sanitary arrangements of the place, and said to-day that she would gladly pay any addition to the doctor's salary which would secure a thoroughly good man.'

'I must see her before I decide,' said Ambrose, 'and will make my own stipulations. Beggars cannot be choosers, and I don't precisely see how I am to fight on in London. Meanwhile, good-night, William, and a happy Easter to us all!'

So they parted for the night; and Mr. and Mrs. Erle deplored, not for the first or last time, that Ambrose was so unpractical.

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CHAPTER V.

AFTER the morning service on Easter day, Miss Brown accepted Mrs. Erle's invitation to come into the parsonage and take luncheon at their early dinner. Ambrose had followed Mr. Erle into the vestry, and was apparently in no haste to present himself in the drawing-room, for he was next seen careering through the garden, with Pippin on his shoulders, and Nero, the great Newfoundland, at his heels. Martha answered Mrs. Erle's remarks at random, and presently walked to the window, in order, as she said, to watch the dog, observing that his uncouth gambols were quite inconsistent with his usual sedate dignity.

'Yes,' said Helen; 'but all animals are fond of Uncle Ambrose, and Nero always looks on him as his master.'

'Mr. Arnold is not looking well,' said Martha.

'Not at all,' replied Mrs. Erle. 'I do not think his London life suits him; and yet he seems unwilling to give it up.'

'I do not wonder at that,' said Martha.

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'No man likes the admission of failure; and the appointment of surgeon to the Hedworth tile-works can scarcely be considered a promotion. So he has refused it?'

'Not definitely,' said Mrs. Erle; 'and sometimes a man will hear sense from an indifferent person when his own family can make nothing of him, so I hope you will demand an answer in person.'

'Mr. Arnold has always appeared to me a very high-minded young man,' said Mrs. Jenkins. And as there was the embarrassed and half-affronted pause with which people receive a compliment on their near relation, Miss Brown said, laughing—

'What do you mean by that double-edged saying, Jen? that Mr. Arnold is haughty, or that he only shows what you used to instil into my mind under the name of "proper pride," which was generally enforced when I was not sufficiently particular about the straightness of my collar or the smoothness of my hair?'

'Uncle Ambrose has not much of that proper pride just now,' said Helen, as he again passed the window at a canter, bareheaded, and his flaxen locks flying wild, save the handful by which Pippin held fast to steady himself in his

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uncertain seat. The next moment the two playfellows entered the room, and Mrs. Erle said, reproachfully—

'My dear Ambrose, you should not encourage Pippin to make such a riot with all his Sunday things on.'

'They are not the worse,' said Ambrose, setting down the child, and proceeding to greet Miss Brown with a formal bow, strongly contrasting with the careless ease of his usual manner.

Martha coloured, and then said bluntly—

'Are we still, Mr. Arnold, to meet on the terms of doctor and patient, or patient's niece?'

This allusion to the relation for whom Martha still wore such deep mourning, appeared to wound Mr. Arnold; he drew his brows together, and said, even more stiffly than before—

'I was not aware, Miss Brown, that any change was expected, or desired; but I will do my best to make my manners to order.'

Mrs. Erle was not unnaturally provoked by such unnecessary pugnacity; Miss Brown, on the other hand, appeared rather to enjoy it:

'Perhaps, then, you will write a medical

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prescription—so much honey to so much gall, added to a proper infusion of London Pride. *Is* London Pride among the simples of an apothecary's chest, Mr. Arnold?'

Ambrose smiled an unwilling smile; and his nephews, John and Richard, looked up from their books to enjoy a laugh at his discomfiture. Dinner was announced, and Mr. Arnold pointedly avoided Miss Brown's side of the table, and devoted himself to Pippin's entertainment, who in consequence went off in a series of explosive giggles, which drew down reproving looks from his parents.

'It is all Uncle Ambrose,' said Pippin, in justification, when the last burst of merriment interrupted Mrs. Jenkins's meek tones, as she was deploring some village casualty.

'I am afraid I must plead guilty,' said Ambrose. 'Two days' holiday make a schoolboy of me, and so I forget my good manners.'

'*Is* it to be only two days' holiday?' said Miss Brown, leaning forward to make her question distinctly audible amid the clatter of knives and forks; 'we—Mrs. Erle hopes you are to make a longer stay here.'

'If I do stay,' said Ambrose, rather stiffly, 'it will not be to make holiday. But you must

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excuse me, Miss Brown, from discussing my private affairs in full conclave.'

Miss Brown said no more; but Pippin was too much of an *enfant terrible* to be so easily silenced—

'Oh, do stay, Uncle Ambrose, and send for that cat which wears walnut-shells.'

'Which wears *what?*' his brothers asked in concert; and there was a general laugh at Pippin's credulity, for which Mr. Arnold was again obliged to declare himself responsible.

The family dinner was rather a long affair; yet there was still half-an-hour to dispose of before the time of afternoon service. It was a lovely spring day, bright and balmy, and the suggestion of a walk on the common proved so popular, that the whole party set out, with the exception of Mrs. Jenkins, who was no walker, and Mr. Erle, who had to give some touches to his afternoon sermon. This was an excellent opportunity for a private conference with Miss Brown, of which Mr. Arnold showed a perverse disinclination to avail himself, attaching himself to the younger party, while the three ladies walked on in front. But Mrs. Erle was not so submissive a sister as to endure this state of

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things, and she presently waited for Ambrose to come up with them.

'Pippin can walk with Helen and me,' she said, taking the child's hand; 'and now, Ambrose, you can have your talk with Miss Brown. She has a right to an answer, whether it is to be yes or no.'

'True, if one only knew which it was to be,' said Ambrose.

But he took the place assigned to him beside Miss Brown, and suffered her vigorous steps to place some paces between them and the rest of the party before entering on the subject.

'And now,' Martha said, bending her dark eyes on him with a singular expression of mingled daring and timidity, 'and now I think there is no reason why you should not tell me whether you intend to be the new surgeon of Hedworth.'

'There is no reason,' Ambrose replied, 'except the one I have just given Amy, that I do not know my own mind. It is as well to speak frankly, Miss Brown. Had an indifferent person made me such an offer, I should have accepted it, even with eagerness, for I think I could be useful here, and there would be a not unpleasant novelty in finding myself

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once more secure of daily bread. But it would be extremely disagreeable to me to be under an obligation to you, and especially to accept a position in which we are, from our different modes of thought, almost certain to come into collision. You might exercise a petty and vexatious interference in all my schemes, and you are the last person in the world from whom I could brook such control.'

'Of that I am quite aware, since you are so ready to take offence where none is meant. I cannot quite guess with what schemes you expect me to interfere, unless you have a grand project of clothing the small tile-makers in silk and feeding them on plum-cake. But I assure you that I am quite prepared to give you your swing in all things, on the same principle that a pastry-cook lets his shop-boy loose on the raspberry tarts. When you have been imposed upon to your heart's content, I shall expect you to settle down as a sober and cynical member of society.'

'There,' Ambrose replied, with rising colour, 'it is such light and scoffing speeches, involving the denial of all truth and goodness, which make me feel how impossible it is that we should ever work together. I will go back

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to my London attic, and try one chance more.'

Martha's face was also flushed, as she rejoined with equal earnestness, although with less impetuosity—

'No you will *not*, Mr. Arnold. All your knowledge of medicine is not needed to tell what any woman can see written on your face, that your present life, whether it be from starvation of body or anxiety of mind, is destroying you, so that the last chance of which you speak is a speedy and a certain death. And whatever philosophy, and something higher than philosophy, may teach, life is sweet, and an obscure and self-sought death is shameful.'

'Be it so, then,' Ambrose moodily replied; 'an obscure and shameful death shall be my portion.'

There was a moment's silence, only broken by the tinkling of a distant sheep-bell; and then Martha said, in a voice half-strangled by a sob—

'This is a bright and beautiful world, surely wide enough for both of us.'

'Only not within the limits of the same parish,' replied Ambrose, apparently unwilling to betray how much he was startled by her softened mood. 'I believe you mean kindly

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by me, Miss Brown, and I can scarcely tell why I feel so unwilling to accept your kindness. Let us each go our own way.'

'We may do so, even if you are living at Hedworth. I ask it as a favour to myself, because I honestly believe that a better selection could not be made. We may make a solemn compact never to invade each other's territory; and if we meet at the parsonage, it will be common ground.'

'I am not so childish,' said Ambrose, resisting with difficulty the inclination to resent Martha's bantering tone. 'We need make no compact, but trust to mutual antipathy to keep us apart. I suppose I must accept your offer, Miss Brown, and drift, like a useless log, where the tide may strand me. Only it must distinctly be understood to be an experiment; and if it fails, I shall be no worse off than I was before. Let us turn back, and overtake the others.'

'Well?' said Mrs. Erle, anxiously.

'Well,' her brother repeated, 'Miss Brown has carried the day, and I daresay she will triumph inhumanly.'

'No,' said Miss Brown, 'I feel that I hold my victory by so slight a thread that I cannot afford to risk it by offending you.'

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But though policy thus compelled her to keep her tongue in order, it could not prevent her eyes from glittering with the light of triumph.

Helen was also greatly pleased: 'It will be very nice to have you settled so near. It is barely four miles to Hedworth across the Common, and I shall be always walking over with papa or one of the boys.'

'Well, I shall be settled there within a week, if the house is ready for me. I must run up to town on Tuesday, and it will not take long to transplant my household gods.'

'Your household gods,' repeated Pippin, doubtfully; and as it was much more amusing to laugh at Pippin's prosaic mind than to explain away his difficulties, his thoughts were running on Uncle Ambrose's transgression of the second commandment all through the afternoon service.

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CHAPTER VI.

BROUGHT up in the seclusion of her country home, Helen had happily found no opportunity of forming the so-called female friendships in which most young ladies take pleasure. She was spared the light and flippant talk which is as ready to dignify a passing fancy with the name of love as to stifle the germ of a true and deep attachment, which construes the ordinary attentions of society into food for vanity and self-consciousness, and sullies all the freshness of maiden love. Within the last year or two, Helen had been permitted to read the scanty supply of novels which found their way to the parsonage. She had gleaned from her father and mother some reminiscences of the days of their courtship, and she had lately obtained a glimpse of real romance in the bashful confession of their pretty housemaid, Mary, that the young man with whom she had been keeping company for three years thought they had better wait no longer—would Miss Helen mind breaking it to her mistress? For the rest,

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love was a field untrodden, almost unthought of, since it was wholly without influence on the interests of her daily life. Now, however, instinct had led Helen to the brink of a great discovery, real or imaginary, which she was burning to communicate to a sympathetic listener. Her Uncle Ambrose, on whom she could generally rely, was in this case out of the question; her sister Rose was too young for a confidante, and she finally decided that her mother was the only fitting person to serve for a bundle of reeds to whom the important secret might be whispered. Accordingly, when the children's lessons had been put away on Monday morning, and they were turned out into the garden for an hour's run before dinner, Helen sat down with her mother to the basket of plain needlework, out of which each extracted their portion, and she felt that the moment was come. Even the opportunity of introducing the subject was given by Mrs. Erle's first remark.

'Your father and Ambrose have walked over to Hedworth. I hope he will be pleased with what he sees there, for he seems in good heart about his prospects this morning.'

'Yes, mamma,' said Helen. Then, as her

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throat grew dry, she decided that she must come to the point at once, and she said, breathlessly, 'Do you know, mamma, what I guessed yesterday? Miss Brown and Uncle Ambrose are in love.'

'With each other! My dear, it is quite preposterous,' said Mrs. Erle, even a little scrapily, and her reproachful tone was scarcely needed to heighten Helen's blushes.

'Still, I *do* think so, mamma. I am not sure they know it themselves; indeed, I am almost certain that Uncle Ambrose is fighting against the thought in his own mind, and that makes him behave so oddly, and even uncivilly, to her.'

'The idea is perfectly absurd,' repeated Mrs. Erle. 'There never were two people who had less in common; and Ambrose is so unreasonably intolerant of those who do not agree with him.'

Still Helen persisted—

'It is because he likes or loves Miss Brown for herself that he is so intolerant of the faults of her character, and he exaggerates them in order to hide from himself a feeling of which he is ashamed. For he has so often said how much he dislikes and despises a man who marries for money.'

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'It would be impossible to argue you out of a theory which you have taken so much pains to construct,' rejoined Mrs. Erle. 'I can only repeat my doubts, and advise you to think as little about it as possible. I should be extremely annoyed if any one had cause to think that Ambrose was settling at Hedworth with such an object in view; and he himself would instantly throw up the appointment if the thing was hinted.'

'Yes, mamma; and that was the reason he was so unwilling to accept it. Altogether, I am afraid it will never come to good; but I am quite sure that I am right.'

'What put the notion into your head?' said Mrs. Erle, her incredulity a little shaken by Helen's pertinacity.

'I do not know. It flashed across me yesterday afternoon, making everything plain which puzzled me before. Uncle Ambrose's worn harassed look and bitter way of speaking are not natural to him; and I was sure that something worse than money cares were pressing on him; and then when I saw them together, how he avoided her, and how anxious she was to please him, I felt how it was.'

'Miss Brown's manner certainly was un-

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usual,' said Mrs. Erle: 'there was a mixture of playfulness and softness which I never saw before. However it may be, Helen, we must have no match-making. In a worldly point of view, it would be a great thing for Ambrose, but I do not think she would make him happy, and I will not be responsible for bringing them together.'

'I never thought of interfering, mamma; but surely there is no harm in watching them and wondering a little.'

'A little, not too much, Helen. Match-making is not a profitable amusement,' said the mother; and the discussion was allowed to drop. Of course, however, Mrs. Erle took the first opportunity of imparting Helen's suspicions to her husband, who treated them with still more ridicule than she had done.

'Those two in love! Pray, my dear, send for the trashiest novel Mr. Barfoot's shop can produce to drive such nonsense out of Helen's head. Miss Brown loves liberty and independence too well to surrender them in a hurry; and Ambrose is not the man to fascinate her. As for him, no names were too hard for her in the course of our walk. I am not sure that he did not call her a hyæna.' This,

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however, was an exaggeration on Mr. Erle's part.

Ambrose came in, rather inspirited by the first sight of his new home. He had found an invaluable carpenter, he told Helen, who engaged to make almost every necessary article of furniture in deal. Shelves for his books, a dining and study-table, and all the fittings of his physic-room.

'He cannot make your carpets, however, or your beds,' said Helen; 'you must get those in London. Oh, Uncle Ambrose, I wonder whether mamma will let me go up to town with you for a day's shopping. It would be very amusing, and I am sure I could help you in a great many ways.'

'I am sure of it too,' said Ambrose; 'but it would tire you too much to go up and down in a day, and do all the shopping besides. Is there no one who can take you in for a night?'

'I do not know of any one,' said Helen; and as she spoke Miss Brown entered the room, and asked unceremoniously—

'Well, Miss Erle, what are you sighing about?'

'Uncle Ambrose and I were only wondering how we could manage a day in London toge-

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ther, that I might help him to get his furniture.'

'Oh!' said Martha, with some hesitation, 'I intended—I imagined, all that might be arranged here.'

Helen wondered whether her uncle detected, as she did, Miss Brown's intention to provide the furniture herself. At all events, his answer was too plain to be misunderstood.

'A good deal is to be of home manufacture, Miss Brown. But the resources of Hedworth are not inexhaustible; and for the luxuries of life I must go to London.'

'Of course,' said Miss Brown, yielding the point without a struggle. 'Well, then, what is the difficulty about Helen?'

'Only house room,' said Helen; 'that is, if mamma sees no objection to my going. Uncle Ambrose lives in lodgings, and we know no one well enough to ask for hospitality.'

'As to that,' said Martha, 'the whole of the gaunt mansion in Bedford-square is at your service. I will write to Mrs. Cantrell, the housekeeper, to have a room and dinner ready for you to-morrow—if it is to be to-morrow.'

Helen drew back, pleased, and yet afraid that she was indulging in that dangerous pro-

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pensity for match-making against which she had been warned.

'Oh! thank you, Miss Brown: it is not worth while to give so much trouble, and it does not really signify. It was only a fancy of my own, and I have said nothing to mamma about it.'

'There is no reason why we should not say it now, however. Where is Mrs. Erle?'

'In the sitting-room,' said Helen, glancing doubtfully at Ambrose, and as he offered no opposition, she consented to lead the way there, and lay the matter before her mother.

The sitting-room was upstairs, and on the way they passed the door of Helen's bed-chamber.

'Let us come in here for a moment,' Martha said, waiting for no invitation to enter, and sitting down on the narrow bed, for it was a mere slip of a room, with scanty accommodation for visitors. 'Before this visit to London is finally settled, I want to know whether Mr. Arnold will be affronted if I act on my original intention of furnishing his house for him; not for him specially, but for whoever may chance to be its tenant. You are more likely than I to understand his wishes; and, as he often

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politely hints, I want the natural delicacy of feeling which ought to be my guide in such a matter. I do not wish to be obtrusive in my offers, only to do what is liberal and fair.'

'I think papa would be the best judge,' said Helen.

'You are the best judge of what is likely to annoy Mr. Arnold.'

'I believe this *would* annoy him,' said Helen, making a great effort to overcome the indecision which she knew was particularly distasteful to Martha. 'Uncle Ambrose is very independent: he has refused help even from us, when he has been in the greatest straits; and he said that he should not like to be under any obligation to you.'

'Which might disturb his conviction of my money-getting, avaricious propensities,' said Martha. 'Well, thank you, Miss Erle. Of course, you will say nothing to Mr. Arnold of the intention he will not allow me to execute. I may, at all events, have the pleasure of making this journey to London easy. I can fancy how wildly astray he would go in his purchases if he is left to himself.'

'Most likely,' said Helen, laughing off her embarrassment, and rejoiced to escape so easily

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from the private conference which had filled her with no little alarm.

Mrs. Erle was propitious. She was pleased with Helen's pleasure in the expedition, and cordially accepted Miss Brown's offer of housing her in Bedford-square; so that the matter was soon arranged, and the letter with directions to Mrs. Cantrell was written at Mrs. Erle's writing-table, to ensure its catching the afternoon post. Miss Brown went home without returning to the drawing-room, and Ambrose and the Erle family abandoned themselves to an eager discussion on 'good wearing colours,' and on the relative economy of Brussels and Kidderminster carpets, Ambrose, with amusing pertinacity, giving a voice for the most costly and least profitable article, and at the same time fixing the limit of expense at an impracticably low standard.

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CHAPTER VII.

'IT is a dreadful responsibility, Uncle Ambrose,' said Helen, as they walked together to the station next morning; 'I have got twenty pounds in my pocket, and am to spend nearly the whole of it in buying summer clothes for us all. Print frocks for Rose and Mary, and a muslin dress for myself, and pocket-handkerchiefs for the boys, and—I forget what comes next, but I have a long list in my pocket.'

'Of which you may spare me the enumeration,' said Ambrose, laughing; 'for I suppose I shall know all about it in due time, if I am to sit out the shopping in some draper's shop.'

'It is to depend on what Mrs. Cantrell is like. Mamma said that if she seemed a good-natured, understanding sort of woman, I might ask her to go with me, for she can help me to choose the things, and it would be very tiresome for you.'

'And take up a good deal of time. I shall want to-morrow afternoon to visit my old patients once more, some of whom will miss

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me. I am not sure if I am not after all deserting my colours. As to old Cantrell, she is intensely respectable and good-hearted; I always thought her the most human element of the old *ménage*, and I saw a good deal of her in her master's illness.'

They hurried on to catch the train, and then took their seats in a crowded second-class carriage, which precluded all conversation, and Ambrose leaned his head on his hand, looking grave or bored, except when his features relaxed at the sight of Helen's placid, smiling face, while she conned over her commissions, or indulged in anticipations of all the pleasures of a visit to London. The pleasure seemed more doubtful when their cab drew up before the door of the dingy old house in Bedford-square, but Helen was reassured by Mrs. Cantrell's appearance, who came in person to open the door, and stood smiling and curtseying on the threshold. In her soft black silk, white apron, and close cap, she looked like the model of a good upper servant, and there was an unfeigned welcome in her greeting to Mr. Arnold.

'It does me good to see you again, sir, and looking pretty hearty, too.'

'I am glad you say so, Mrs. Cantrell,' re-

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joined Ambrose, cordially shaking hands, 'for it is not the general opinion. Here is my niece, Miss Erle, whom I am to quarter upon you. I suppose you heard from Miss Brown?'

'Oh, yes, sir. Her room is ready, and you shall have luncheon in five minutes, for as soon as the bell rang I told the girl to put the chops to the fire. And what time will you be pleased to dine, sir?'

'You must ask Miss Erle, she is the guest, you know,' replied Ambrose.

Mrs. Cantrell turned to Helen with an apologetic little curtsey, yet could not be diverted from her attentions to the more familiar visitor. 'Yes, sir, but Miss Brown ordered dinner for two, and Miss Erle would feel lonely spending the evening by herself.'

'Oh yes, Uncle Ambrose, I shall be frightened to death in this great empty house, if you don't come back with me. Only we had better make our dinner now, and then we need only have tea when we come in.'

'If it is allowed,' said Ambrose, smiling at the housekeeper's impracticable face; 'but we must submit to Mrs. Cantrell's beneficent despotism, and I see she has decided that we are to do everything in state—silver plate and all.'

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'Yes, sir,' said Mrs. Cantrell, with a slightly injured air, as she ushered the visitors into the dining-room, where a neat little luncheon was prepared at one end of a table which might have dined sixteen. An early breakfast, and the excitement of the journey disposed Helen to enjoy the meal, although she had intended to content herself with eating a bun at the first pastrycook's, and it was not until her hunger was appeased, that she felt inclined to look about her. The costly, but heavy furniture, the dark rich paper and maroon hangings, all added to the inevitable gloom of a London dining-room, as she observed to Ambrose.

'*Richesse oblige*,' he replied. 'It is all in character with the household arrangements; luxury without comfort or refinement. Long after he was unfit for the exertion, and dieted on the sparest regimen, Mr. Brown used to totter down to go through the ceremony of an elaborate dinner with his niece and Mrs. Jenkins, sitting in dreary vacuity at this howling wilderness of a table. The old patriarch of a labourer's cottage, who dreams away his life in a warm and comfortable chimney corner, is a much happier man.'

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'Papa would call that hyperbole,' said Helen, laughing. 'This beautifully polished table is not at all like a howling wilderness, and then I suspect that your ideal patriarch must often be querulous at the crying of babies, and all the other worries which go on in the common room of a cottage. Was Mr. Brown at all like his niece?'

'I do not know how much was family likeness, or how much of the shrewdness and hardness natural to him were acquired by her. Miss Brown had no woman friend—for Mrs. Jenkins cannot be called a friend—nothing to soften or raise her, and though often disagreeing in words, she was in fact moulded and influenced by her uncle. Hers is a fine nature utterly spoiled.'

'If it *is* spoiled,' said Helen, timidly. 'I like her, even now, and I dare say she will improve.'

'No,' said Ambrose, 'she will be more hardened by her new position, with many to rule, and none to love. She was in a certain sense fond of her uncle, and he doted upon her.'

'What an odd picture,' said Helen, who had got up to make a further inspection of the

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room, her attention caught by an oil painting of a large deer-hound, beside which a child had thrown herself, one sturdy arm being placed upon the creature's neck, and the little girl's head averted and wholly veiled by her brown curls; 'is it supposed to be a portrait of the dog or the child?'

'It was to have been a portrait of her—of Miss Brown. The old man used to tell the story with great delight—how she was bribed to sit on condition that the artist's dog should be introduced into the picture, but no bribe could induce her to afford a glimpse of her face, for she said she was ugly, and the dog was beautiful.'

'I dare say she was rather a plain child,' said Helen. 'Now, when she is well dressed, she looks almost handsome. And that was her uncle, I suppose, in the days of his youth. Look at the bright blue coat, and tight trousers, and short-waisted yellow waistcoat. I am glad that *my* uncle does not look such a guy.'

'Don't, Helen,' said Ambrose, the light words jarring him; 'remember that it is scarcely three months since I saw him in this room, a dying man. It was a sad and hope-

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less old age, and there is the more reason to speak of it feelingly.'

'I did not mean to be unfeeling, Uncle Ambrose. I was only thinking of the picture, not of the man, whom I never saw. We must not talk of him any more, or I shall be dreadfully frightened when bed-time comes, for I suppose I shall sleep all alone on a floor by myself. Now it is quite time to begin our shopping.'

A great deal of shopping may be transacted in two hours, and about five o'clock Mr. Arnold put Helen into a cab to go back to Bedford-square, and went off by himself, promising to rejoin her at seven. Mrs. Cantrell had anticipated some such arrangement, and when Helen arrived she was taken up to her bed-room, and offered, or ordered, the refreshment of a cup of tea.

'Oh, thank you, Mrs. Cantrell,' said Helen, 'I have eaten one dinner already, and if I am to eat another, to which I am not at all accustomed——'

'The tea will refresh you,' interposed Mrs. Cantrell, taking it from the hands of her satellite, who now appeared at the bedroom-door; and tea, served on a silver waiter, and drunk

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from a cup of such delicate china, had a peculiar fragrance which seemed wanting in the more homely accompaniments to which Helen was used at the parsonage. She sat down in a luxurious chair, and decided that it was pleasant to be rich.

'This is Miss Brown's own room,' said Mrs. Cantrell. 'It is the lightest and cheerfulest in the house, so I thought you would prefer it. And I was going to say, ma'am, that perhaps you and Mr. Arnold will excuse the brown-holland covers in the drawing-room. The notice being so short, and as it is only for one night, I did not have them took off.'

'Oh, no, thank you, Mrs. Cantrell. I am quite ashamed of giving so much trouble already. And now, if you don't mind sitting down a minute'—for Mrs. Cantrell remained respectfully standing—'I want to tell you what we have bought, and if you think we have done pretty well.' And Helen straightway went into details of their purchases, and found Mrs. Cantrell much more interested than Ambrose had been in the unhappy circumstance that the bed with brass knobs which Helen coveted was so dear that they had been forced to select a plain iron one. On the whole, Mrs.

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Cantrell said they had done very well 'for the money;' and there was an unconscious assumption of superiority in the last clause, for the attics of her old master's house were certainly furnished at greater cost than Mr. Arnold's future home.

'And so Mr. Arnold is going to settle in the country,' she said, when the history of the afternoon's shopping was at an end.

'Yes; quite in our neighbourhood. Some day we shall see you at Elwood, Mrs. Cantrell.'

'On a visit, may be. Miss Brown was good enough to ask me to take charge for her there as here—but I had lived here a many years, and the country seemed strange; so I just stay on, and keep things as master liked to have them.'

'He never lived in the country?' said Helen.

'No, miss. Once a year he and Miss Brown went down to the sea, to Brighton or Margate, that we might have a house cleaning. Master was partial to London.'

'But not Miss Brown. I cannot fancy her living all the year in town,' said Helen. Then, from a consciousness that curiosity about the living mistress was more unjustifiable than that about the dead master, she checked herself; and Mrs. Cantrell's tact led her to think that

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the interview had lasted long enough, so she withdrew.

While Helen's weary limbs reposed on the *chaise longue*, her mind was busy with speculations about the former occupant of the room. She noticed that Mrs. Cantrell spoke of Martha, respectfully indeed, but with none of the affection which an old servant might naturally feel for the only child of the house, now the owner of all its possessions. She made no special inquiries after Miss Brown's welfare, expressed no anxiety to see her. Helen began to fear that her uncle's assertion did not spring from the bitterness of suppressed love—that Martha might really be cold and self-absorbed. Even this misgiving was not allowed to interfere with Helen's pet scheme; and she resolved that contact with such a high and noble nature as that of Ambrose would thaw the most chilling reserve, and change self-indulgence into self-sacrifice.

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CHAPTER VIII.

HELEN and her uncle returned home next day by an afternoon train, and they found Mr. Erle and his two little daughters awaiting its arrival at the station. It was not only sisterly affection, but anxiety about their new summer frocks, which had made Rose and Mary so anxious for the walk; and while Helen described the 'small running pattern,' they cast wistful eyes at the great bale of goods, and unwillingly agreed that it must remain at the station until Elias could walk up for it after his day's work was over. At this moment, however, the Elwood carriage was descried driving up the new and dusty road which led to the station, and Miss Brown drew up while the train moved off with a scream and whistle not at all admired by her spirited horses. Ambrose placed himself at their heads, and observed that 'they were too thoroughbred for a lady's driving.'

'It depends on the size and strength of her hands,' said Martha, drawing attention to the

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fact that her dark gauntlets covered hands which were certainly unduly large, though not unshapely.

'Mere physical strength has nothing to do with it,' rejoined Ambrose; 'in that of course any horse has an advantage over the strongest man. But skill and courage and presence of mind are needed to drive such a pair as this.'

'It would be conceited to say anything of my skill,' said Martha; 'but I must vindicate my courage by telling you that my object in driving this way to-day was not so much for the sake of taking Miss Erle home, as in order to give the horses another opportunity of making their usual splutter when they come across a train. And now I am here, you will scarcely sanction the risk to Miss Erle's life in taking a seat in the phaeton.'

'Oh, *I* do not mind,' said Helen, readily; 'and I have walked so much this morning, that I shall be very glad to escape the two miles' walk.'

'And the parcel, Helen,' said Rose, in an audible whisper, which provoked a laugh at her anxiety; but she certainly walked home with a lighter heart when she thought that all the purchases would reach the parsonage before

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them. New dresses for the younger members of the Erle family were not a frequent indulgence, and it was as well to make the most of the pleasure.

'Well, how have you done?' said Martha, when they had driven off.

'Pretty well,' answered Helen. 'We might have spent a good deal more money without furnishing the house too luxuriously, but Uncle Ambrose does not really care about luxuries, and I think he will be very comfortable.'

'And he has taken his leave of London?'

'Yes. I believe he was up all last night packing; and this morning he went round to see his old patients—most of them the very poor. When he came back for me, and said that he had settled not to have an arm-chair or a dining-room carpet at present, I knew what *that* meant. Giving money instead of getting it has always been the result of his doctoring.'

'Well!' said Martha, with a flourish of the whip which excited the horses more than Helen thought agreeable. She turned pale, and sought to steady herself in her seat, while Martha said, with a smile, 'Mr. Arnold has frightened you by his forebodings; I have them well in hand. But I was thinking of the per-

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versity of man, rather than of beasts, and used the whip too freely.'

'Oh,' said Helen, thinking that if the 'perversity of man' bore any reference to her uncle, the implied desire to make use of a horsewhip was not very loverlike. But then Martha would not subject herself to ordinary rules in love more than in other matters.

'Mrs. Cantrell sent her "dooty,"' said Helen, presently.

'Ah, how is old Cantrell?'

'Very well, and very kind. She made me as comfortable as possible, and she went out shopping with me this morning.'

'And how did the old place look?'

'I don't know how it used to look, but I suppose much as it does now—rather dingy, and rich, and luxurious. *I* liked it very much for a little while, and I should have liked to stay longer, for we are hardly ever in London, and going up for the day to shop is very fatiguing and bustling.'

'Well,' said Martha, 'whenever I launch out into the gaieties of a London season, which it would be scarcely decent to do this year, you shall go with me to see the world.'

Helen did not say much, but she treasured

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up the promise, and wondered what her mother would think of it.

Meanwhile, Ambrose and his brother-in-law talked over his purchases; and as they crossed the parsonage garden and saw Miss Brown's carriage standing at the door, he said, with some irritation—

'Considering that Miss Brown is quite a new comer, you have become wonderfully intimate.'

'We have not courted the intimacy,' replied Mr. Erle; 'but I certainly feel no objection to being on friendly terms with the lady of the manor; and I do not wonder that she is glad to speak to some one who has at all events a little more mind than her old Jenkins. Helen is quite brightened up by this new friendship.'

'I do not think it at all an improving friendship,' rejoined Ambrose. 'However, if it will give Miss Brown any pleasure to know how many yards of Dutch carpeting I have bought, I suppose I must indulge her.' And he went rather sulkily into the drawing-room.

Rose and Mary followed, *not* sulkily, and were presently busied at the end of the room in ransacking the precious parcel, and carrying on a whispered conversation over its contents.

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Mrs. Erle, after looking absent and preoccupied for a few moments, was irresistibly impelled to join the group; and thus Ambrose and Miss Brown were left to enjoy a *tête-à-tête*.

'Miss Erle tells me you have wound up your London affairs,' said Martha.

'Yes,' replied Ambrose, 'that page of life is turned over. It remains to be seen how I shall like the next.'

'I expect you to like it.'

'Do you?' said Ambrose, stretching out his long limbs, as he leaned back in his chair; and Miss Brown took the hint, and rose to depart. Helen, who had not allowed the criticisms of her mother and sisters on her purchases to claim her whole attention, could not flatter herself that this interview had done much to induce a better understanding between the supposed lovers.

Miss Brown had asked the Erles to dinner on the following day, and in a general way included Mr. Arnold in the invitation; but he said that he was too busy to go, and in fact did not return from Hedworth, where he and the two boys went to overlook the painting and papering of his new house, until the Elwood carriage had come to fetch the party from the

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parsonage. Since they had given up their carriage, and had no neighbours within walking distance, Mr. and Mrs. Erle had declined all invitations, so that the dinner was a great event to Helen. The resources of her wardrobe were but slender, and though she spent a long while over her toilette, she was not well satisfied with the result, unconscious that her simple white muslin was much more in character with her style of beauty than more elaborate dress. Her face had all the softness and prettiness of youth, without much regularity of feature; she had a clear and delicate complexion, a small head, so well shaped, that the fair and glossy, but not very luxuriant hair, set it off to the best advantage.

'Needhorn (the butcher) told cook that it was quite a large party,' said Mrs. Erle. 'Mrs. Jenkins wanted sweetbreads and palates, and other things for *entrées*, besides a fore-quarter of lamb. It seems rather a strong measure to ask the county neighbourhood before receiving invitations from them, since Miss Brown is the new comer.'

'A strong-minded young woman will also be strong-measured,' rejoined Mr. Erle.

'I believe,' said Helen, 'that Miss Brown

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got up this party because her trustee, Mr. Benson, offered a visit with his son. She said she hated them both, and should swamp them in company.'

'I presume that is a quotation, my dear,' said Mr. Erle; 'and I should advise you not to adopt your new friend's style of talking. It is more forcible than ladylike.'

'I do not call Miss Brown my friend,' said Helen. 'I like her because she is good-natured to me; but if we were friends we should call each other Martha and Helen, and altogether be quite different.'

'There is certainly nothing ideal about her,' said Mr. Erle; 'but as we are to eat her salt, and are now driving in her carriage, it is scarcely fair to discuss her peculiarities.'

The Bensons, father and son, were the only strangers in the party assembled in the large drawing-room at Elwood. Mr. Trelawney, the agent for the estate, was there, with whom the Erles were rather intimate; Mr. Lewis, the clergyman of the adjoining parish, and two or three of the county families, with all of whom they were more or less acquainted. Helen was the only young lady present; and while looking anxiously round, wondering to whom

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she was to be assigned when dinner was announced, Mrs. Jenkins came up to her, and introduced Mr. Lionel Benson. Such a sounding prefix neutralized the plebeian surname, and Helen looked up with some interest, and seeing that he was young and well-looking, she was not disposed to murmur at her fate. Neither father nor son fulfilled the conditions of the conventional man of business. The elder Mr. Benson was a tall, portly man, with a high forehead, and straight features; in which his son, with the necessary allowance for a difference of thirty years, greatly resembled him. They both looked like men of keen intellect and high cultivation, but in Lionel an expression of refinement—in his father, that of ability—was severally predominant. Helen, who, though remarkably self-possessed for her age, was not a quick observer, noticed neither the resemblance nor the difference between father and son, although they sat opposite to each other; she was too much occupied in that interchange of small-talk, which was to enable her to act her part at the dinner-table with credit, and in this Mr. Lionel Benson was certainly a proficient.

Towards the end of dinner, the discussion

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on the sights which Helen had *not* seen in her brief visits to London, and on the objects of local interest which Mr. Benson was to visit during his stay at Elwood Manor, insensibly glided into more personal talk.

'What is the name of the gentleman whom Miss Brown selected to take her in to dinner?' said Lionel.

'That is Mr. Erle, my father. I saw he looked quite surprised and annoyed when she whispered something to him as we passed, for there are several gentlemen whom she ought rather to have taken. There is Sir Henry Wentworth, and Colonel Tillotson, and Mr. Burnham—they are all among our county magnates. But Miss Brown knows us better than the others, and she does not do things quite like other people.'

'No—nor ever did, luckily for me,' said Mr. Benson. Then, as Helen looked curious, and as if her curiosity was restrained by good-breeding, he added lightly, 'This is scarcely the time or the place for such a revelation, as my father would be mortified to hear me publish the discomfiture of his pet scheme. If Miss Brown had not struck out an original and decided line for herself, she would, some

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three years ago, have exchanged her name for the equally euphonious one of Benson.'

Helen coloured and felt uncomfortable. She concluded that her companion spoke in jest; but it was not a subject on which she was used to jesting.

'You look incredulous, Miss Erle; but I assure you I do not invent an episode so little creditable to myself. Her uncle and my father agreed, when we were still boy and girl, on an alliance between the two houses; and when she was eighteen and I was twenty-one the matter was unfolded to me, and I was commanded to try my fortune. I cannot say I was very keen about it. She is better-looking now than she was then; and it was possibly the consciousness of some youthful extravagance which made a rich marriage convenient, and made me submissive. At all events, I did as I was told, and was rewarded by a very pretty burst of temper. Miss Brown supposed I meant to insult her, and called it a commercial speculation of my respected parent's, to which I basely lent myself. She said I was an Epicurean—I don't know where she learned the name or its meaning, for she was never given to much learning—and it was altogether a stormy inter-

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view. The higher powers interposed in vain, and the young lady was obdurate. Yet she had no great love for her uncle, and a particular distaste for his way of life; and one might have supposed that the alternative proposed was not so *very* distasteful.'

Helen did not know whether sympathy or ridicule were expected of her, and felt quite unequal to comment on the rejection which the gentleman detailed with so much nonchalance. At last she said, rather bluntly—

'I wonder you come here?'

'It is such an old story now,' said Lionel. 'We have met a hundred times since, and are always very polite to each other. Three years are enough to wear out the strongest sentiment, and mine now only consists in a faint interest in the heiress's future. Before the old man's death, there was some rumour of a fortune-hunting doctor.'

Helen was young in the world's ways; and instead of letting the allusion pass, she coloured deeply, and said, with more energy than politeness—

'That is *not true*—at least, if you mean my uncle, as I suppose you do.'

Mr. Benson looked surprised, and at that

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moment the signal was given for the ladies to retire. When they were in the drawing-room, Martha found a moment, in the midst of her duties as hostess, to speak to Helen apart.

'I don't know what possessed old Jen to consign you to Lionel Benson. However, you seemed to get on very well together—rather too well.'

'We were not on particularly amiable terms when you got up,' said Helen; but she did not feel at all inclined to betray the cause of disagreement.

Martha did her part well that evening. Her real anxiety to please atoned for her naturally brusque manners; and even the refusal to recognise the order of county precedence was forgiven. Helen sat beside her for the remainder of the evening, and thus secured herself from the chance of having to satisfy Mr. Benson's curiosity about her uncle Ambrose. If, however, the information was of any importance to him, Lionel had no difficulty in acquiring it; for Helen heard him ask her father whether some relation of his had not attended Mr. Brown; to which Mr. Erle of course assented, adding that Mr. Arnold was now settling in the neighbourhood.

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The party broke up early, as a country dinner-party is apt to do; and when Mr. Benson gave Helen her cloak, he bade her good-night without an allusion to their previous conversation.

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CHAPTER IX.

AT the early breakfast at the Parsonage, next morning, there was great pleasure in talking over the incidents of their dinner-party; and Ambrose was an interested listener.

'I don't know when I was at a dinner which went off so well,' said Mr. Erle; 'partly, perhaps, on account of the unusual excellence of the material, which certainly increases the vivacity of the guests. People were well placed, in spite of the mistake Miss Brown made in taking me in; and she has the art of giving a fresh start to conversation whenever it flags.'

'Then, one or two strangers make an agreeable variety in a party of country neighbours,' said Mrs. Erle. 'The Mr. Bensons are both pleasant talkers. Do you know anything of them, Ambrose?'

'I have heard of them, and met the father occasionally in old Mr. Brown's room. They are solicitors; and I believe it is a wealthy firm, and does a good deal of City business.'

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'Oh! they are solicitors,' said Helen, a little mortified to discover that such was the profession of her handsome and pleasant neighbour.

'Yes,—they were Mr. Brown's lawyers; and the elder Benson and his partner are, I believe, the trustees for all Miss Brown's money. The old man had a great opinion of them.'

'Which is not, by Helen's account, shared by his niece,' said Mr. Erle.

'She was very civil to them last night,' said Helen, who did not feel disposed to repeat Mr. Lionel Benson's confidences.

'Even Miss Brown could scarcely be otherwise at the head of her own table,' observed Ambrose. 'I do not myself much fancy what I have seen or heard of Mr. Benson, although he is by way of being intensely respectable, and a man of cultivated tastes.'

'Helen got on famously with the son,' said Mr. Erle; 'I think they were the most talkative pair all round the table. Altogether, it is a pity you were not there, Ambrose. I should have liked to introduce you to the Wentworths and Tillotsons, now you are settling down here; and Trelawney was particularly anxious to see you about Hedworth matters.'

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'Business can be better discussed at home than in the Elwood drawing-room, so I will call on Trelawney this morning; and for the rest, I shall make acquaintance with your neighbours in due time. I was very glad to have a quiet evening at home, for we were all tired by our exertions. The boys slept profoundly, and I was not much more alive.'

Helen was in her mother's room up-stairs, hearing Pippin repeat, 'How doth the little busy bee,' when a knock at the door was followed by the entrance of Martha Brown. Perhaps the dissipation of the previous evening had indisposed Helen for the task, and made her think Pippin unusually slow and hesitating in his repetition, for the interruption was very welcome both to teacher and pupil, and the child was dismissed to run in the garden.

'Your mother said I might come up and find you here,' said Martha; 'and so I have escaped from those Bensons. They insisted on my bringing them over this morning to see Mr. Erle about Ilex Lodge, which Mr. Trelawney told them was to let; and it seems Lionel Benson fancies it for his country-house. Of course, I know what that means,—that the father and son are resolved to keep watch over

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me; and when Mr. Benson talked of his paternal interest, and so on, it made my blood boil. Oh, Helen! it is a miserable thing to be rich.'

Helen was not sure of that fact, but she did see that Martha was, from whatever cause, troubled and unhappy, and she pitied her accordingly.

'You need not see more of Mr. Benson than you please, and I do not see that he can interfere with you,' said she.

'He will do as much mischief as he can, and it is one misery of my position that I must be always on my guard. In the first place, he has made a very promising beginning of an intimacy here, and as he is pleasant in a certain sense, he can always make his way. There is a deceitful openness in his manner, but I warn you, Helen, that the truth is not in him.'

'I do not need such a solemn warning,' said Helen, laughing; 'we do not dine out or give dinners, and as he is to be denied admittance to Elwood Manor, we are not likely to meet elsewhere.'

'My dear,' shouted Mr. Erle, from below, and Helen ran to the top of the stairs; 'we

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are going to see Ilex Lodge, and you may come too, if you would like the walk, and can put on your things in less than five minutes.'

'You see it is my fate,' said Helen, with a smile which deprecated Miss Brown's displeasure, and she certainly felt no unwillingness to see a little more of this dangerous young man, and equipped herself for the walk with unusual celerity. Miss Brown went too, possibly in hopes of discouraging Mr. Benson's scheme by a little judicious opposition, and Ambrose, who had not yet gone out, was induced to join the party.

Ilex Lodge was a stucco-fronted cottage, which had been built by some enterprising landholder on the outskirts of Mr. Erle's parish, soon after the opening of the railway. Elwood was, however, rather too far from London to be chosen as a residence for business men, and the speculation had hitherto been unsuccessful. The cottage had only been inhabited for a few months at a time by some summer tenant who had not undertaken to keep it in repair, and so the stucco became green and mouldy, the paint was peeling off the woodwork, and the garden was grass-grown and neglected.

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After ringing in vain, Ambrose made a foray into the back premises, and summoned the old woman, who was too deaf to hear the bell, to undo the front door, and open the shutters of the lower rooms.

'It is not a bad drawing-room,' said Martha, candidly; 'but I am sure the house is damp. Do you not smell dry-rot, Mr. Arnold?'

'I think not,' replied Ambrose. 'The room is fusty from being shut up, but it is built on a dry soil, and I believe that sun and air will soon disperse the smell.'

'I quite agree with you,' said Mr. Benson, senior; 'the place is sadly out of repair, but Lionel has only to lay out a few hundreds on it to make it a charming summer residence.'

Mr. Erle looked admiringly at the man who could so lightly advise his son 'to lay out a few hundreds,' and thought that it would be quite worth while to secure such a parishioner.

'What are your views, Miss Erle?' said Lionel; and Helen felt it her duty to follow Miss Brown's lead.

'I think it a nasty little place. I always did; partly, because it is always let to uninteresting people.'

'I shall be tempted to take it, in order to

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destroy such associations,' said Lionel, with a smile, and Martha seized upon Helen and walked her into the adjoining room.

'Such impertinent assurance,' she said; 'but I can see it is useless to say any more, for the more openly I object, the more resolved they are to persevere. I wonder whether I could rent the place over their heads.'

'That would look so odd after what has passed,' said Helen; 'and besides, since they do not care about money, Mr. Benson would be sure to find some other cottage in the neighbourhood.'

'And you feel unwilling to lose your new neighbour.'

Helen felt that the reproach was unfair.

'I said all I could to discourage him.'

'I believe you did, but unfortunately I had already said too much. It is for your sake as well as my own that I wish to keep them out of the place.'

They rejoined the rest of the party, to find matters so far advanced, that Mr. Erle was offering to show the Bensons the way to the builder, in order to confer with him as to the probable expense of putting the house in repair. Miss Brown preferred taking the nearest road

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to the parsonage, with Helen and her uncle; and thus they divided company.

'What do you think of them, Mr. Arnold?' said Martha.

'I do not form my opinions so hastily as you do,' he replied; and Helen could not help laughing.

'Oh, Uncle Ambrose! when mamma has so often told you that you are the most prejudiced person in the world.'

'Well, perhaps I meant to say that I had not made up my mind in this particular case. The younger is rather supercilious: otherwise, I do not see much to like or dislike.'

'It is curious to find that this is becoming quite a populous neighbourhood,' said Helen. 'Between Elwood Manor and Ilex Lodge we shall be really gay.'

'It will be two rival attractions,' said Martha; 'for if Lionel Benson comes into the country, I intend to give out that I will not meet him.'

'A declaration which will make him and yourself of equal importance,' said Ambrose.

'I felt that I should provoke your sarcasm, Mr. Arnold; but I intend, notwithstanding, to signify my aversion in every way short of posting it up in the church porch.'

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'In which case you will have the pleasure of originating a very pretty feud in what has hitherto been a peaceable neighbourhood,' said Ambrose.

Martha could not restrain a gesture of impatience: 'I shall go home,' she said; 'for I am in no humour for unpleasant truths. Good bye, Miss Erle.'

Helen shook hands, Ambrose raised his hat, and Martha turned back to take the footpath to Elwood Manor. They had hardly parted company when Lionel Benson overtook them.

'Oh, that *was* Miss Brown whom I saw going in the other direction,' he said. And Helen, although unwilling to accept Martha's prejudices, admitted that there was something disagreeably inquisitive in his tone, and assented very shortly.

'I might have gone with her then,' said Mr. Benson. 'My father wished me to come after you and beg her not to wait for us, as we might be detained some time with the builder. And now, if you will allow me, I can walk back with you to the parsonage.'

'Unless you want to see the builder,' said Helen.

'Oh, no; I may leave all that to my father.

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I think, Mr. Arnold, that you are also settling in this neighbourhood.'

'Yes,' said Ambrose; 'but I do not intend to be any acquisition to the society. I shall have enough to do at Hedworth.'

'Ah, indeed, at Hedworth. I believe you are to occupy a rather important position; so I understood from Miss Brown.'

'Miss Brown can tell you more about it than I can,' replied Ambrose. And Mr. Benson, who could take a hint as quickly as most men, understood the disinclination to gratify what must appear an impertinent curiosity.

'You must excuse the question,' he said; 'but you know we have had professionally a good deal to do with Miss Brown's affairs, and my intention to come here gives me a double interest in the place where she has chosen to settle.'

Ambrose did not think the apology much more to the purpose than the previous inquiry. He had done his part in escorting his niece to the gate of the parsonage garden, and he was not inclined to go farther.

'I am going off to this important settlement at Hedworth. I will not ask you to go with me to-day, Helen, but to-morrow there will be plenty for you to do.'

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'I intend to go over with the boys, and spend the whole day,' said Helen. 'Good-bye for the present, Uncle Ambrose; come home in time for tea.'

She stood at the gate, expecting Mr. Benson also to take leave, but this time he did not take a hint.

'Will you not ask me to explore your domain, Miss Erle? What I saw from the drawing-room looked very charming.'

'There is nothing to see,' replied Helen.

'Which means that you wish to get rid of me.'

'I mean what I say,' said Helen, colouring. 'Of course, if it will give you any pleasure to walk round the paddock and the kitchen garden, I shall be glad to take you.'

'I scarcely like to accept such an ungracious permission.'

Helen stood with her hand on the latch of the garden gate, and instead of replying in the same bantering tone, felt much disposed to say, 'Then don't.' But she was really anxious to be civil; and on repeating the offer to walk round the shrubbery, Mr. Benson made no further demur, and followed her into the grounds. There was, as Helen had assured him, little to see—a well-kept lawn, with a few

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plots of flowers; a good kitchen garden, and a paddock skirted by the shrubbery.

Helen walked as fast as she could, longing to justify herself to her mother, who might, if she saw them from the window, think it rather an indecorous proceeding; and was too little at ease to second Mr. Benson's attempts at conversation. Yet he talked sensibly and pleasantly, refraining from any allusion either to her uncle or Miss Brown, and showing real discrimination in his remarks on their shrubs and flowers. In spite of the distrust which Martha had laboured to infuse, Helen felt the charm of his polished manners; and they must be sincere, she argued, since he could gain nothing by securing her good opinion. When they again approached the house, they encountered Mrs. Erle going into the parish.

'Oh, I will come with you,' said Helen, 'for I have shown Mr. Benson everything now that he can care to see. He *would* make me walk round the place with him,' she added, when he had taken leave; 'I suppose there was no harm in it?'

'No, no particular harm,' said Mrs. Erle, satisfied to know that Helen was aware of the virtue of discretion.

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CHAPTER X.

IN the course of the next fortnight, Lionel Benson concluded the agreement for Ilex Lodge, and Ambrose migrated to his new home at Hedworth. He gave a house-warming on the occasion to Helen and Pippin, Rose and Mary, for the boys had gone back to school, and it was beyond Mrs. Erle's walk. Very soon after breakfast the young party set out, Pippin bearing a little basket of forced strawberries, which had just arrived from Elwood Manor.

'I wish Miss Brown had come herself, instead of sending it by the groom,' said Pippin; 'for I daresay she would have liked to go to Uncle Ambrose's feast, and then we should have gone grandly, in the carriage.'

'Oh, I think the walk across the common is much better fun,' said Rose. 'And then you know, Pippin, *it would not do* for Miss Brown to go and dine with Uncle Ambrose, since she is a young lady.'

'Not so very young,' rejoined Pippin. 'Be-

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sides, Helen is a young lady, and so are you and Mary—almost.'

'Yes; but *we* can go because he is our uncle.'

'That makes no difference,' said Pippin, who had not yet taken his first lessons in etiquette.

Pippin's friends found cause to echo his wish about the Elwood carriage, for his progress was very slow: happily, Ambrose came out to meet them, and the last mile was accomplished on his shoulders. As they approached Hedworth, the fresh, pine-grown common, with its sheltered hollows, was exchanged for a high and bleak moorland, with a cold clay soil; and when they entered the hamlet, Pippin's remark expressed the general feeling.

'Oh, Uncle Ambrose, I think this is rather ugly!'

'People do not generally come to a brick-field for beauty,' rejoined Ambrose.

'It is so untidy: that is the worst of it,' said Helen, as they defiled through the straggling row of mean and ill-built cottages. 'There is nothing so horrible as a cabbage-garden; and I think that Uncle Ambrose's first performances in medicine should be to poison all the pigs; for if there is no demand for cabbages, perhaps

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they will try to make the gardens a little ornamental.'

'I intend to introduce a taste for horticulture,' said Ambrose. 'My roses will certainly excel those of the parsonage-garden or Elwood Manor, for there is nothing so good for roses as a stiff clay soil.'

'Oh, and by-the-bye, Uncle Ambrose,' said Pippin, 'Miss Brown has sent you some strawberries.'

'Not to Uncle Ambrose in particular,' said Rose. 'She said that they were to be our contribution to the feast.'

'Of course she did not think he would be so greedy as to eat them all up himself,' said Pippin; 'but I *know* she meant them for Uncle Ambrose. I suppose you think that just as improper as the other thing.'

'What other thing?' said Ambrose, laughing.

Helen laughed too, yet could not help colouring as she explained the allusion to the dispute on decorum. She could not quite decide whether Ambrose's remark was intended to be complimentary or the reverse.

'I agree with Pippin that Miss Brown ought not to be classed with ordinary young ladies.'

'There, Rose!' said Pippin, triumphantly;

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and Rose had the good grace to submit to the verdict, without further questioning.

'This is the palace,' said Helen, who had been to Hedworth to help Ambrose in his arrangements, and was therefore competent to act showman. She opened the little garden-gate, which gave access to a two-storeyed house built of the same yellow brick as the rest of the village, and only distinguished by the bright brass-plate which bore the name of 'Mr. Ambrose Arnold, Surgeon.' Helen thought of the luxurious appointments of Elwood Manor, and felt that her uncle's position here widened immeasurably the gulf between him and its possessor.

An old servant of the Erles had come to be housekeeper to 'Mr. Ambrose,' and she opened the door and exchanged a rapturous greeting with her former nursling, Pippin. In her anxiety to do him honour, she was ready to lavish all the slender stores of her new master; and while the young ladies ranged over the house, Pippin willingly repaired to the kitchen to whet his appetite on a slice of bread-and-jam, and watch the preparations for dinner.

'It is lucky that Hedworth is not still nearer

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home,' said Helen; 'for one reason why mamma resolved to part with Dennis was because she spoiled Pippin so inveterately, and now she may do it without let or hindrance.'

'She does not spoil *me*,' said Ambrose, rather pathetically. 'She is stern at all times, but absolutely implacable at meals. If I do not eat the exact quantity, or take the exact time at dinner which she thinks expedient, she appears with the air of a victim to know if her cooking does not give satisfaction; or observes ironically that I, being a medical gentleman, ought to know better than to bolt my food. "'Taint no ways to be wondered at I look so badly." I wish, Helen, you would find out exactly how many minutes she wishes to go to a mutton-chop, for then I could time myself, and escape further persecution.'

'No,' said Helen; 'you must assert yourself at once, or you will be always in thraldom. The first time you are a few minutes late for dinner, Dennis will ask reproachfully whether you prefer your mutton-chops overdone, but you have only to answer with proper decision that you like to have them ready whenever you ask for them, and she will submit without a protest.'

'A man can never rebel successfully,' re-

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plied Ambrose. 'When other means fail, he is vanquished by an absolute dearth of buttons to his shirts.'

'Wear studs,' said Mary; and Ambrose laughingly rejoined that the resources of his nieces only proved the final superiority of woman in any contest. Ambrose was in good spirits, and exerted himself to make the day pass pleasantly, and they all enjoyed their early dinner, and then an afternoon of really hard work in the garden. The walk was fresh-gravelled, the oval flower-bed re-modelled, and a list made of the plants which might be most successfully transferred from the parsonage-garden, before Helen discovered that the sun was getting low, and they must return home.

'I don't know how you will ever drag that child across the common,' said Ambrose, pointing through the open door of the kitchen to the Windsor chair on which Pippin was seated, taking another slight refection of bread and jam. 'Shall we charter a donkey-cart, or will you leave him for the night, for me to bring over to-morrow? I have not time to go with you now.'

'Oh, no; we must not leave him to overeat himself still further,' said Helen. 'Perhaps

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we *had* better have a donkey-cart, if one can be found which is not used for drawing coals.'

'Here comes something,—a pony-carriage,' said Mary, who was standing at the garden-gate: 'it is Miss Brown, and papa with her, I do believe. They have come to fetch us home.'

'We intended to meet you half-way across the common,' said Miss Brown. 'Mrs. Erle said you were to start at four.'

'Now you *are* here,' said Ambrose, 'will you not come in, and wait while Dennis makes you a cup of tea?'

'Well, thank you. I dare say it will be refreshing,' said Martha, stepping out; and Helen estimated the value of the concession; for Martha was wont to consider tea-drinking in the afternoon an effeminate indulgence. She was pleased, too, with the courteous deference of her uncle's manner in doing the honours of his own house, and rejoiced at the delay which had procured this encounter.

'Pray sit in *the* arm-chair, Miss Brown,' said Mr. Erle. 'You observe that the room does not afford a choice.'

'I never sit in an easy chair,' replied Martha; 'and indeed I do not care to sit down at all.

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May I look about me, Mr. Arnold, or will it seem impertinent?'

'That depends on *how* you look, and what you say, Miss Brown.'

'Oh, I promise to remember that very disagreeable remark which used to be made in my youth—that my eyes are not in my fingers. I will look and not touch.'

'My possessions are not so fragile that I need be afraid of your fingers,' said Ambrose.

'Only of my tongue? Then, if I make no remarks, may I look at the prints on the wall, and at the backs of your books?'

'If you like,' said Ambrose; but it was so evident that the concession was unwillingly made, that Miss Brown instantly sat down.

'I consider that unnecessarily sensitive,' observed Mr. Erle. 'I should not like any one but my wife to rummage over my possessions in my absence; but when I am in the study to defend my little whims and fancies, I give you free will to range where you please.'

'Thank you,' said Martha; 'but I know all about *you* already. Mr. Arnold is more inscrutable.'

'Exactly,' said Ambrose; 'as I knew that you only wished to look about you in order to

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gratify an idle curiosity, I did not much admire it.'

'Is it an idle curiosity to wish to know more of—of whom shall I say?—of Helen's uncle?'

'Of the surgeon of Hedworth,' said Ambrose.

Martha in replying, went as near to shrugging her shoulders as a lady can do. 'I perceive, Mr. Arnold, that you intend to transplant your London pride to this little garden.'

'Well, now,' said Mr. Erle, laughing, 'I think we might employ our time more profitably than in exchanging these amenities. I pointed out to Miss Brown as we came along, what I consider the best site for the new schools—Parker's Piece, you know.'

'Yes; either that or Tinker's End,' said Ambrose; 'the bit of green there, would do still better for a playground.'

Martha entered into this question with interest, and proved herself, as Mr. Erle said admiringly, to have an excellent head for business. She was not led away by one or two of Ambrose's enthusiastic schemes of reform, observing that they should get into all sorts of trouble, if they attempted the sudden conversion of a neglected place like Hedworth into a

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model village, and though Ambrose chafed a little, he was constrained to admit the justice of her reasoning.

'That is the woman to do good in her position,' said Mr. Erle, energetically, as he and Helen walked home together; for the pony-carriage would only convey Pippin and the two younger girls. 'If she had not so much common sense, she might be preyed upon in all sorts of ways, and that *hardness*, as Ambrose calls it, is a great safeguard. I have to make quite sure of my ground, before asking help for any parish charity; but if I satisfy her the object is a good one, I may ask for what I please, which proves that her caution does not arise from illiberality. But you never went more wide of the mark than in your surmise of love-passages between her and your uncle Ambrose. They cannot draw together in the merest trifles.'

Helen very much regretted having thrown out that suggestion, but she held to it nevertheless, and hoped that she was not perverse for so doing.

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CHAPTER XI.

'LOOK here, Jen,' said Martha; 'you know that when my mind is made up, I always go through the form of asking advice. As I foresaw, Mr. Benson writes to ask whether Lionel may quarter himself here for a few days, to overlook the alterations of Ilex Lodge, which is not yet habitable. Do you think my answer too curt?

'MY DEAR MR. BENSON,

'We have all agreed that the past should be forgotten, but memory is sometimes perverse, and mine will not allow me to receive as a guest, the gentleman who once honoured me by a proposal to stand in a nearer relationship. When you came down to Elwood with Mr. Lionel Benson last month, I was not aware of his intention to settle at Ilex Lodge, and although perfectly willing to meet him on the same terms as any other country neighbours, I do not think that the circumstances of our former acquaintance make any greater intimacy desirable.

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'I believe that though the appearance of the little public-house opposite the church is rather unpromising, the beds are clean and comfortable, and this might afford your son a refuge until he could get into his own house.

'Yours faithfully,

'MARTHA BROWN.'

'Do you not think, my dear,' said Mrs. Jenkins, when Martha paused for an opinion, 'that it would be better to receive Mr. Lionel for a few days, rather than offend his father by such a letter as this? Or you might put it in a different way.'

'Oh, yes; I might say how much I regretted that I was unable to receive a guest I valued and esteemed so highly, or else assure Lionel that he was welcome to make my house his home for as long as he pleased.'

'I do not wish you to receive him, since it is so disagreeable to you, but I think you ought to consider how desirable it is to remain on good terms with your guardian, and not offend him unnecessarily.'

'Mr. Benson is *not* my guardian, only my trustee; and though it is, as you observe, highly desirable to be on good terms with

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every one, I do not consider myself in his power. And, in fact, he evidently does not wish to quarrel with me, so that I know I shall receive the blandest answer to my note, and Lionel will come down to the Goat and Compasses, or to his own house, which I have no doubt is perfectly fit to receive him, and call next day as if nothing had happened.'

'You know best, my dear; but if you consider that Mr. Lionel cannot marry you against your will—'

'Oh,' said Martha, 'even Lionel's assurance has given up that scheme as hopeless. His present object is only to make mischief, and prevent my marrying any one else.'

Mrs. Jenkins' meek little face wore a look of perplexity. 'Then, Martha, I do not see why you are so much afraid of Mr. Lionel; for you have often said that you do not wish to marry at present.'

'At present, or in the future,' replied Martha. 'You need not imagine, my dear old Jen, that I wished to imply that the end of your duennaship is at hand. But without being afraid of Lionel Benson, may I not resent his coming here to pry into my hates and

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friendships, to draw his own conclusions, and impute unworthy motives. And another thing troubles me; he will certainly establish an intimacy at the parsonage, finding that I see more of the Erles than of any one else, and then, by way of pastime, he will get up a flirtation with Helen. He made a very good beginning at dinner the other night.'

'Mr. and Mrs. Erle have too much good sense and principle not to check a mere flirtation,' said Mrs. Jenkins.

'Thinking as I do of Lionel Benson, a *mere* flirtation, by which I conclude you mean one that ends in a disappointment, would be better for Helen than one ending in marriage. But we have had enough of the hateful subject; and so you may stamp my letter, Jen, and send it with the others. I am going out to look at the young turkeys.'

Two or three wet days interrupted the intercourse which had become tolerably frequent between the inhabitants of the parsonage and the manor house; and when next they met, it was after service on Sunday morning. The day, though fair, was very damp, not favourable for sauntering in the garden, or even for a walk on the common, and Mrs.

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Jenkins and Martha went straight into the house with the Erles.

'It is not drying weather,' observed Mr. Erle; 'and if Mr. Benson is nervous about damp walls, we may have him as our guest for some time, for the plasterers are still at work in Ilex Lodge.'

'As *your* guest!' repeated Martha.

'Yes. We could do no less than offer him a bed, when he wrote to ask me to engage one for him at the inn. He said you had not mentioned the name, but I conclude you meant the Goat and Compasses, which is a mere pot-house; even a commercial gentleman would scorn to sleep there.'

'I did not see the least necessity for his coming at all until his own house is ready for him,' said Martha.

'It is natural enough that he should wish to see the alterations in which he has embarked,' rejoined Mr. Erle. 'There is nothing so engrossing as brick and mortar; and I longed, when I saw the men at work the other day, to begin the improvements we have talked of making to this old house for the last ten years.'

'And which we never shall make,' said the prudent wife.

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'I may wish for them, nevertheless; there is nothing extravagant in that, Amy. Ilex Lodge can be but a cockney abode at best; but I think Mr. Benson will make it very comfortable inside.'

'That he is sure to do,' said Martha. 'It is a *specialité* of the Bensons to make themselves comfortable,—for which reason I rather enjoyed sending him to the Goat and Compasses.'

'If he is a man of luxurious tastes,' said Mrs. Erle, who had not cordially approved of her husband's ready invitation, 'I am afraid he will not be much pleased with our homely fare.'

'Oh! he has a sort of superficial good-breeding which makes him—or, at all events, makes him appear—pleased with everything. He is not a troublesome inmate,' said Martha.

'I thought him a pleasant young fellow,' resumed Mr. Erle; 'and it is refreshing to get a peep of the outer world now and then. We must dine late to-morrow, as he is not coming till the afternoon; and Ambrose has promised to come:—and we want you, Miss Brown, to make up the party of six. You must not refuse this time; for as we never give dinners,

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there is no knowing when you may have another opportunity.'

'I wish you would ask me to meet any one but Lionel Benson,' said Martha. 'As I explained to Mr. Arnold, we do not like each other, and I *did* say that I would avoid meeting him in society whenever it was possible.'

'Then it is my business to make you unsay your words,' replied Mr. Erle. 'We cannot afford to quarrel in the country, and you must not introduce such a bad habit.'

'Well, I will come,' said Martha; and the concession was not ungracefully made. 'But I must repeat, that I would rather drink tea with you on any other night.'

Just as the bells rang up for the afternoon service, Ambrose walked in, looking hot and tired.

'I hardly thought I should get to church at all,' he said. 'When you build our district church at Hedworth, Miss Brown, I hope I shall sometimes accomplish a morning service; and unless you build it soon, I shall certainly be the only person there, since you have allowed the population which has been settled there these twenty years to grow up as heathens.'

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'Whom *I* have allowed. My tenure of Elwood dates from last Lady Day,' said Martha. 'But in telling you this, I suppose you will only think that I wish to shirk responsibility.'

'I may say so—or something equally unjustifiable. I forgot that you are only a tenant,' said Ambrose. 'My walk was hot and hurried, and I am afraid that it has ruffled my temper.'

'You always try to do too much,' observed Mr. Erle, 'which is trying to any man's temper. You ought to keep a horse, for you will never be able to see all your patients on foot. A horse is as necessary to a country surgeon as a black gown is to a parson. And by the way, my dear, how rusty my gown looked on Edwardes last Sunday: I saw that he did not half like putting it on.'

Ambrose laughed, saying that he might safely promise to buy a horse as soon as his brother-in-law bought a new gown; and Mrs. Erle said rather touchily, that it would do Mr. Edwardes good to wear a shabby gown, for he was much too particular about his dress, considering that he was a married man with a family.

Mr. Erle went to look out his sermon, his wife and daughter to put on their bonnets;

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and Mrs. Jenkins followed them up stairs, to make sure that the little brown curls peeped out from below her close cap in due succession, and sat neatly round her face. But Martha was less particular; and after one hasty glance at the drawing-room mirror, as she tied her bonnet-strings, she turned round to Ambrose, who stood at the table, taking up and idly turning over the books.

'I am glad to see you alone, Mr. Arnold, for I want to speak to you about Mr. Lionel Benson. He is coming here to-morrow.'

'So I hear,' said Ambrose.

'I am annoyed about it,' continued Martha; 'for you must know that I refused to have him at Elwood, and never imagined that your sister would offer him hospitality. You thought me unreasonable in the expression of my dislike the other day, yet I must repeat that I *do* dislike and distrust him; and I hope you will do all in your power to prevent his becoming intimate here.'

'You must forgive me, Miss Brown,' said Ambrose, 'if I also repeat what I said when the subject was discussed before,—that your wish to make a party, and enlist prejudices against Mr. Lionel Benson, appears to me a very un-

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worthy ambition. Surely it is better to let each man stand on his own footing; and I, at all events, shall not discourage William Erle's inclination to pay the ordinary civilities to a new comer. Giving Mr. Benson a few nights' lodging does not necessarily involve the intimacy of which you are so much afraid; but if they cannot even offer this trifling courtesy without forfeiting your friendship, say so frankly, and they must take their choice.'

'I might have known,' rejoined Martha, as calmly as she could, 'that you would misconstrue what I have said. I meant well by you all, and especially by Helen; but since the warning was spoken by me, let it pass as one token more of ill-natured prejudice.'

Without waiting for reply, Martha left the room; and Ambrose, hearing footsteps on the stair, effected *his* retreat by the window into the garden. There he stood, screened from sight by the projecting angle of the wall, or Helen would certainly have stayed the ruthless hand which tore down a cluster of the Banksia rose, and then, impatient of its sickly sweetness, flung it aside.

'It is madness and folly to come here,' thought Ambrose, 'to court the intercourse I

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profess to shun. Why should I make her hate me, and veil the torturing truth by rough words and marked discourtesy? She must not know how I worship her very faults, and love the noble nature which shines through all, and am humbled by its contrast to my own weak, undisciplined temper,—swayed by every impulse, and chafed to madness by the conflict with duty, or pride, or whatever else forbids me to declare my love. I will not—dare not—face the world's scorn, and be deemed a fortune-hunting adventurer, even if the love which once, perhaps, I might have won is not for ever estranged from me by the wayward rejection of every kind word and glance.'

'Oh, Uncle Ambrose!' said Pippin, startled to come upon his uncle, leaning with folded arms against the wall; 'they have all gone to church, and I was going to play at Desert Island by myself, but it will be better fun with you. Helen said you had gone in with Miss Brown.'

'No,—but I am going now,' said Ambrose, startled out of his dream, and only stopping to give Pippin one summerset before setting him on his feet again, and hurrying down the church path. He would not come into the

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house when the service was over, but did not retract his promise to come to dinner next day, although he heard that Martha was to be of the party.

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CHAPTER XII.

HELEN felt that her duty to her friend—and in spite of her professions to the contrary, she really did begin to look upon Martha as her friend—obliged her to dislike this visit of Mr. Benson's; but human nature is weak, and her first thought on Monday morning was of some pleasure in prospect; her next, an involuntary but very genuine feeling of satisfaction that he was coming early in the week, since her light muslin dress would still look fresh and untumbled. Heiresses with an unlimited, or, at all events, a very liberal allowance, know little of the trials and mortifications which beset young ladies who wish to look nice on thirty pounds a year.

Mrs. Erle had also her cares on the subject; it was troublesome to drill the little maid into the ceremonies of an occasional late dinner, and still more difficult to restrain the ardour of her cook, who was much too ambitious to emulate the Elwood *cuisine*. Altogether, Mr. Benson ought to have been flattered by the sensation

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which his visit caused in the little household. At four o'clock he came, and found only Helen in the drawing-room, for Mrs. Erle had been summoned to the store-cupboard for the third time that day.

'It was *very* kind of your father to give me such a pleasant cordial invitation to your house,' said Lionel; 'a kindness the more unexpected after the repulse I met with at Elwood.'

'Oh!' said Helen, 'Miss Brown did not say that you had wished to go there.'

'Then I ought to have kept my own counsel,' said Lionel, gaily. 'But since the one great mortification I received in that quarter, I am hardened to petty slights. Miss Brown put it on propriety, which is rather amusing in a strong-minded woman, is it not? I wish I could find the opportunity to assure her that I have not the smallest intention to try my luck again.'

Helen was annoyed, and showed it so plainly by her silence and her rising colour, that Lionel felt constrained to justify himself.

'You think me uncharitable, Miss Erle; but surely a little bitterness is excusable, when Miss Brown refuses to forgive a transaction in which I might naturally consider myself the

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injured person. I can see that she is resolved to prejudice the neighbourhood against me; and in such a contest of course the heiress must be victorious.'

'I do not think that Miss Brown intends to make a quarrel. She is coming to dine here this evening,' said Helen.

'That was kindly done of Mr. and Mrs. Erle; for of course it *is* their doing.'

'Of course she could not come unless mamma invited her.'

'Ah, but I mean more than that, as you know, Miss Erle. Confess that Miss Brown did not wish to meet me.'

'I do not know,' rejoined Helen, with some *naïveté*, 'why you are so very anxious to hear what it seems you know already—that Miss Brown does not like you.'

Lionel laughed, and supposed it might be considered an idle curiosity; and then allowed the subject to drop, much to Helen's relief. Nothing could be more pacific than the meeting was on both sides, when Miss Brown arrived to dinner. They shook hands; Martha asked after his father, and Lionel replied by a polite inquiry for Mrs. Jenkins. Ambrose had not arrived; and Mr. Erle observed that it was of

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no use to wait for him; but he retrieved his character for punctuality by appearing just in time to take Helen in to dinner.

'You look very nice, Helen,' he said, approvingly, as they crossed the little hall together. 'I like to see you well dressed now and then.'

'I should not mind being well dressed always,' said Helen, with a pleased smile, for her uncle's compliments were rare. The party assimilated better than Mrs. Erle had ventured to expect. Ambrose was rather silent, but when he spoke it was not, as usual, with the object of contradicting Miss Brown; nor did she dispute any of Mr. Benson's remarks, although, as Helen guessed from the expression of her mouth, she was sometimes tempted to do so.

When the ladies adjourned to the drawing-room, Martha claimed credit for her forbearance.

'I behaved well, did I not, Mrs. Erle? We were all what schoolboys call "beastly polite."'

Mrs. Erle, always anxious to make Martha 'like other people,' observed that she never allowed *her* schoolboys to use such a word.

'Of course not, in the drawing-room,' said Martha, with an inflection of voice which made

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Helen smile, for she was also aware that her brothers' language was not equally polished when they were not under restraint; 'but you know I am a privileged person, and no other word will express my meaning. And it does not merely apply to Lionel Benson. Mr. Arnold's politeness was an equally superhuman effort.'

'Oh!' said Helen, rather imprudently, 'if you class the two together, I shall know what to think.'

'Will you, Miss Erle?'

'I mean,' said Helen, colouring, 'that you cannot think so *very* ill of Mr. Benson, if you wish to be on the same terms with him as with Uncle Ambrose.'

'I did not mean that, exactly; only that I dislike Mr. Benson nearly as much as Mr. Arnold dislikes me.'

'I do not see that at all,' said Mrs. Erle, with the plaintive note in her voice which gave people some right to call her querulous. 'Instead of continually gauging each other's likes and dislikes, let us all live on good terms together, which is much more agreeable.'

'More agreeable, but not always quite possible,' said Martha, 'especially when you

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refuse to encourage me by applauding my good behaviour at dinner.'

'I thought the dinner did very well,' said Mrs. Erle. 'And I wish you would tell me candidly, Miss Brown, whether you think that the Madeira fritters, which were made on your recipe, were properly done.'

Miss Brown did give her opinion candidly, and the talk diverged to domestic matters until the gentlemen appeared. Lionel Benson slipped into a chair behind Helen's, and began talking in the light, half-bantering tone which is thought acceptable to young ladies, and which *is* sometimes acceptable to those for whom it possesses the charm of novelty. It embarrassed Helen as long as others were silent, but when the talk was sufficiently general to distract attention she became amused by it.

'You are very diligent, Miss Erle.'

'That is what people always say,' replied Helen.

'And what everybody says may be considered a truth.'

'Or a truism. Besides, I did not mean that every one calls *me* diligent, for at home I am generally accused of dawdling. But it is the

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sort of thing which gentlemen think it right to say about needlework.'

'I am afraid the saying is often ironical; for it is in fact rather provoking to see the eyes so steadily cast down. It discourages all conversation.'

'I can always talk better when I am working.'

'Then I will not quarrel with your embroidery, for I want to talk, and I hardly know how to begin.'

'There is no necessity for talking, if you have nothing to say,' said Helen.

'Thank you. That remark gives me the opportunity of asking why you are so much on the defensive. It was not so the first evening we met, and I am afraid that you have been warned that I am a very dangerous young man.'

The random shot was so near the truth, that Helen could not help colouring; but she answered with the spirit which she always showed when roused—

'I am obliged to be on the defensive, Mr. Benson, when you are always making personal remarks, or asking unfair questions.'

'Then the fault rests with me, not with a third person?'

'Yes,' said Helen, briefly.

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'Now,' said Lionel, without betraying the least annoyance, 'I intend to risk offending you by making another personal remark. You ought not to adopt Miss Brown's brusque manner, which is very well for *her*, but it is not in your style. Indeed, I do not admire it in any woman. Do you think me impertinent?'

'Rather,' replied Helen; and Mr. Benson laughed and drew back his chair, as if unwilling to risk another repulse. Helen was pleased with her victory, and yet not displeased with her opponent; and she was rather startled to find herself so busy in recalling the words, and even the tones, of those observations she had pronounced impertinent, that she was obliged to confess her inattention to some parish question which her father was discussing with Miss Brown. At that moment a note was brought in, of which Mrs. Erle presently repeated the contents.

'It is a very civil note from Lady Wentworth, asking us to Dulcote next week, and mentioning that the servant was to leave an invitation at Elwood for you, Miss Brown. Also, she regrets that Sir Henry had not the pleasure of finding Mr. Arnold at home the other day.'

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'Which means that an invitation is impending for you too, Ambrose. You never told me that Sir Henry had called,' said Mr. Erle.

'I found his card one day when I came in; but it is not at all likely that an invitation to Dulcote is to follow,' said Ambrose.

'So I should have said. We were never asked before,' said Mrs. Erle, 'and I do not feel much inclined to go.'

'Oh, mamma!' said Helen, in a deprecating tone, for she had read the note, and ascertained that Miss Erle's name was included in the invitation.

'I think I shall go,' said Martha, 'and I can take Helen under my wing.'

'Yes; or Mr. Erle might take Helen. What do you think, my dear?' said Mrs. Erle.

Mr. Erle thought it would do Amy good to go too; and a conjugal dialogue ensued, to which the maid, who waited for an answer to the note, and the rest of the party were interested listeners. It ended, as any one might have foretold it would end, in the wishes of Mrs. Erle prevailing, and she accepted only for her husband and daughter. The reserve induced by the presence of Lionel Benson, a comparative stranger, made it necessary to sup-

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press the reason which every one understood, —that Mrs. Erle did not consider her dress or her manners fine enough for visiting at a large country house.

'I know what has produced this invitation to Dulcote,' said Mr. Erle, as soon as the note was despatched,—'that breach of precedence at your dinner the other night, Miss Brown. It has set people talking, and makes them imagine some wonderful intimacy.'

'Not so very wonderful,' said Martha, who was always on frank and pleasant terms with Mr. Erle. 'I hope the Wentworths do not ask you merely as my friends, for that would be rather an insult.'

'Oh, we are not so easily insulted,' said Mr. Erle. 'Whatever has procured the invitation, it is a piece of luck for Helen, which I have no doubt she will appreciate.'

'Yes,' said Helen, in whose disposition there was far more of her father's healthy enjoyment of life than of her mother's sensitiveness; 'I have always wished to go about visiting, and I hope that there will be a large party in the house. I thought Lady Wentworth very good-natured the other night, and hardly at all alarming. I am quite sure, on reading over

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the note,' Helen added in an under tone to Ambrose, 'that they mean to ask you either to stay or to dinner.'

'The last is possible enough,' said Ambrose, 'if they have to feed their attorney, and people of that calibre. A large landowner like Sir Henry has to do many civilities of that kind, without, as you may believe, having any great taste for the society of country surgeons or country lawyers.'

In this remark Ambrose forgot either Mr. Benson's presence or his profession; and although addressed to Helen, the words must have been perfectly audible to him. When it was too late to recall them, Ambrose remembered his mistake, but it would scarcely have been retrieved by an apology. Lionel looked admirably unconscious, and Helen said, hurriedly—

'I hope they will ask you while we are there.'

'It will not make much difference to you, as I certainly shall decline the invitation,' said Ambrose.

'And why, Mr. Arnold?' said Martha, suddenly joining in the conversation.

'For several reasons, Miss Brown. A country surgeon has no time to go into society.'

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'A country surgeon will have time for society or any other amusement, if he destroys his hopes of practice by affronting all his great neighbours,' observed Mr. Erle.

'Yes,' said Martha; 'and I am sure *you* will agree with me that Mr. Arnold's determination to put forward his calling as a bar to meeting the rest of the world on equal terms will never forward his success. When people anxiously proclaim their inferiority, we all know that it is only a form of pride.'

'That is quite true,' said Mrs. Erle. 'Unfortunately, no one can teach Ambrose common sense.'

'Then why should you waste time and temper in the attempt?' said Ambrose. 'There is a special absurdity in arguing on the propriety of accepting the invitation I have never received, and I shall leave you to finish it without me.'

'It is always a shame to bully Ambrose,' Mr. Erle observed, when he had bade them good night; 'he is such an odd mixture of obduracy and sensitiveness, that I give him great credit for keeping his temper.'

'If he had only a little practical good sense,' repeated Mrs. Erle.

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'There are higher qualities in the world even than good sense,' said Martha.

'Does Miss Brown allude to good breeding?' Mr. Benson said, softly, to Helen, who had no difficulty in understanding the allusion.

'My uncle never fails wilfully in good breeding,' she replied; 'and you have scarcely a right to be affronted by the allusion to a *country* lawyer, especially as he included himself in the same grade.'

Altogether that evening closed less peaceably than it had begun; but though Helen had disagreed with Mr. Benson, she felt that on one point Martha had wronged him, and that she could not accuse him of untruthfulness. *She* had found him too outspoken, expressing and demanding an opinion with inopportune frankness.

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CHAPTER XIII.

'HAS Miss Brown gone much into the county society?' Mr. Benson inquired at the breakfast-table next morning.

'She has hardly had time to do so yet,' replied Mr. Erle. 'Of course, every one has called; but I think this is her first invitation, and as the Wentworths are the magnates of this neighbourhood, and seem bent on making the visit pleasant to her, I have no doubt they will succeed.'

'And are there sons of the family?'

'Oh,' said Mr. Erle, rather drily; 'you are thinking of drawing out the settlements. But Sir Henry did not marry early, and they have no grown-up children.'

'Well,' said Lionel, magnanimously, 'I confess I should be glad to see Miss Brown well married. Her fortune and her future are a great anxiety to my father, and it would be a pity that she should fall into the hands of a mere adventurer.'

'A thousand pities,' said Mr. Erle; 'but I

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do not see the smallest chance of it. Miss Brown has strong affections and great discrimination of character, and if she marries at all, she will choose worthily. The misfortune is, that a rich woman is so often wounded by being sought for her money, that she is apt to disbelieve in the possibility of disinterested love.'

Helen thought that Mr. Benson looked rather conscious, and as if he regretted the observation which produced this reply; but if this was the case, he carried it off remarkably well.

'I am glad that Miss Brown has fallen so frankly and pleasantly into intimacy here,' he said, and though the words were addressed to all, they were pointed by a glance at Helen; 'it was just what she needed to soften and humanize her, for in her uncle's lifetime she had no companions of her own age, and she led a strange, isolated life. She was always clever, and in her way amusing, but I never saw her to so much advantage as I did last night.'

'I do not quite get on with her,' said Mrs. Erle; 'but she is really neighbourly to us all, and excessively kind to Helen.'

'Yes, mamma,' said Helen; 'and I am sure

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that the more we know, the better we shall like her. I am hardly at all afraid of her now.'

'I am not exactly afraid of her,' replied Mrs. Erle; 'but I sometimes think her tone unfeminine, and without being as fastidious as Ambrose, I understand what he means by calling her hard.'

'*I* do not think her at all hard. That sort of manner often goes with very deep feeling; don't you think so, papa?' said Helen; and Mr. Erle laughed at her enthusiasm for her friend.

After breakfast the two gentlemen were to go to Ilex Lodge. Helen declined to accompany them, but Mr. Erle never enjoyed a walk so well as when his daughter was on his arm, and her objections were overruled. He was too busy a man to set out on a walk which had only one object, and they had not gone far before he darted into a cottage, promising not to detain them a minute as he left Mr. Benson and Helen to pace up and down outside.

'I know what papa's minute will be,' said Helen, laughing. 'I was here two days ago to visit a sick child, but the family was not half so much interested in his illness as in that of the pig, which has some mysterious ailment.

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The cow-doctor could do nothing, and the gentleman, maybe, would look in and see the poor beast.'

'And a pastoral visit to the pig is likely to run to length,' said Lionel.

'Yes; and if once he gets as far as the pig-sty he will begin to talk about the cabbages. Papa is a great oracle in all country matters.'

'He could not occupy a pleasanter position. All I see of your quiet country life makes me envy those who really enjoy it.'

'My uncle Ambrose says we do not really enjoy it, and that to do so, it is necessary to live nearly all one's time in London. He thinks that people who settle down in the country soon become vegetables.'

'As I have seen enough of Mr. Arnold to discover that he is given to paradox, I am not surprised at the fortitude with which he has resigned himself to become a vegetable.'

Helen laughed, and said that there was no risk of *that*, for every one thought that her uncle Ambrose lived too fast, and she did not believe that his nature would ever become even sufficiently sluggish; 'although,' she added, 'he is not so inconsistent as you suppose, for he was really very unwilling to leave London.'

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'Indeed?' And in the tone of this reply there was a shade of polite incredulity, which Helen understood and would not vouchsafe to notice. She felt that there was at all events one other person besides herself who did not think her theory of an attachment between her uncle and her friend altogether preposterous. Mr. Erle now appeared, stooping as he passed under the low doorway, and followed by the mother of the family, whose anxious, sunburnt face brightened at his parting words.

'Well, then, good day, Mrs. Lester. Send down for some broth for the child, and don't fret about the pig. I really think that nothing ails him.'

'Miss Erle had already predicted that the pig was the first object,' said Mr. Benson.

'Well, yes,' replied Mr. Erle; 'I believe it was. I should not have kept you so long if we had not been standing for five minutes over the sty, having disposed of Master Tommy in half the time. I suppose that it was from the novelty of the thing. Sick children are a matter of course; but there is a certain incongruity in visiting an invalid pig—and a fanciful invalid too. I am sure that there was nothing the matter.'

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'I wonder what we shall have to talk about in our Wentworth visit,' said Helen. 'I do not think they read much, which is rather lucky for me, as we see so few new books.'

'No; they are by no means literary,' replied Mr. Erle; 'and if there are no strangers in the house, we shall no doubt talk of the local interests, sick pigs, or otherwise. Unless, indeed, Richard Wentworth is there. He is a man of some cultivation.'

'Richard Wentworth! Then it must be the one I know,' said Mr. Benson; 'a tall, sandy-haired man, about five-and-thirty. We belong to the same club, and have often dined together.'

'Yes; that is the man. People say he is agreeable, and he has certainly more to say than his brother, but I do not like him so well. He is a regular London man.'

'Not a vegetable?' said Helen, demurely.

'No one can say that Sir Henry is a vegetable,' rejoined Mr. Erle. 'He does great good in his generation; and though his enemies might say "that his talk is of bullocks," I do not object to that from a man of sound sense and information. Now, Richard aspires to talk well on all subjects, and will probably patronize

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me by asking what I think of the abolition of church-rates, or of marrying my wife's sister.'

Mr. Benson laughed, and observed that it was a just description of his friend Wentworth, whom, nevertheless, he was always glad to meet.

'A friend! Oh, I did not understand that you were at all intimate with him,' said Mr. Erle.

'Perhaps it would be more correct to call him a familiar acquaintance,' said Lionel. 'As I am in the habit of passing three or four nights a week in his company, I seem to know him well.'

They reached Ilex Lodge almost at the same time as a van of furniture, and Helen watched the unloading with a good deal of interest. The arrangements were all in a very different style from those in which she had so lately assisted her uncle Ambrose; and nothing was wanted to make it a very comfortable bachelor's establishment, with one or two spare rooms.

'I dare say,' observed Mr. Benson, 'that if Wentworth comes into the country, he will not object to occupy one of these, especially considering its neighbourhood to Elwood.'

Reserve checked Helen's inclination to retort,

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but there is a certain freemasonry in most families, and Mr. Erle answered for her.

'Is that quite consistent with your wish that Miss Brown should not marry an adventurer?'

'Richard Wentworth does not deserve so hard a name. He is a man of good private means, not quite equal to his pursuits; and since he is well connected, I hardly think that Miss Brown could do better.'

Helen smiled to think of Martha's indignation, if she could have heard Mr. Benson so generously choosing a husband for her; and Lionel detected her thoughts with his usual quickness.

'Your friendship makes you unnecessarily sensitive to these speculations; but you know they are the doom of heiresses.'

'Then I am glad that it can never be my doom. You know, papa, that I should not mind your being a little richer; for I am quite safe from being an heiress, because of the boys.'

'Perfectly safe, my dear,' said Mr. Erle, laughing; and so the conversation dropped. Helen soon grew tired of wandering about amid littered furniture and matting, and presently suggested to Mr. Erle that as he had beguiled her into making an idle morning, they might

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as well walk on to Elwood, and leave Mr. Benson to finish his arrangements alone.

'I should like to go with you, if it would look friendly, and not officious. Advise me, Miss Erle,' said Mr. Benson.

'I advise you to stay and see your book-cases put up, or it will all be done wrong, to the detriment of your new carpet.'

'That is a polite way of putting it,' said Lionel; and he allowed Helen and her father to set off without him.

'Yes,' said Mr. Erle; 'certainly, for a young lady, you are remarkably cool.'

'I suppose it is infectious,' said Helen; 'for I am sure that Mr. Benson is coolness itself. I was rather tired of him, in the first place; and then his coming would have quite spoiled our visit, as Martha dislikes him so much.'

As it happened, Martha and Mrs. Jenkins were not at home, but when they were coming away they met the carriage in the avenue, and were induced to retrace their steps.

'We have been to Repton, to buy finery for this visit,' said Martha. 'I believe that it would have been less trouble to have gone to London, than to drive ten miles across country

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to lose one's temper in a second-rate shop; but on the whole we have not done so ill. Come upstairs, and see, Helen.'

Mr. Erle, somewhat discomfited, was left to exchange topics with Mrs. Jenkins; while Martha took her parcel in her hand, and led the way up the broad staircase into her private sitting-room.

'Now, Helen,' said Martha, with a gentleness of entreaty which was certain to be appreciated by those who knew her habitual manner, 'you are not so stern as Mr. Arnold, and will not refuse me the pleasure of giving, which is, I can tell you, only a poor compensation for the cares of riches. I think you will enjoy this visit more if you are quite as well dressed as other people.'

'I suppose I might,' said Helen; 'but Uncle Ambrose has a theory about dress; and for once papa and mamma agree with him. He says that people ought to dress consistently, and that it is bad taste to launch out in occasional smartness.'

'Oh, that is, as usual, a reflection on me, because I am not always in unruffled attire, and yet have a turn for good clothes.'

'No, indeed, Miss Brown. I am sure that

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no one was thinking of you. It was one day when we were settling whether I ought to have one really good dress.'

'Perhaps Mr. Arnold will forgive you for having *two* good dresses, though one is inadmissible,' said Martha. 'At all events, there is no harm in cutting the string of the parcel.'

In this Helen agreed with her; and when a lilac and white silk, for morning wear, and a bewitching rose pink for evening, were disclosed, delight overcame her scruples, and the gift was accepted, subject to Mrs. Erle's approval.

'They must be well-made,' said Martha; 'you will let me see to that, if only to prove to Mr. Arnold that my theory of dress is perfect, although it breaks down in practice. And then you are a good subject, since you are young and nice-looking,—whereas finery only makes my hard features more conspicuous.'

'If we are to exchange compliments,' said Helen, 'I must tell you that we all agree that you ought to wear nothing but black velvet and old point. Uncle Ambrose says that all women ought to be in rich and sad colouring; and I know that is because he once saw you in

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Bedford-square, in that dress which suits you so well.'

'Did he? Yes: I remember that I had just dressed for a dinner-party, when my uncle was taken ill, and we had to send off for Mr. Arnold. That is some nine months ago, and I should never have suspected him of bearing such trifles in mind.'

'Uncle Ambrose is sometimes absent, but when a thing makes an impression, he never forgets it,' said Helen. 'And now I must tell you, Miss Brown, that you are not safe from your enemy, even at Dulcote. Mr. Benson knows Mr. Richard Wentworth, and may get himself invited.'

'In order to make our pleasant party complete. It is no more than I expected when once he came into the country; but I am getting into a state of sulky indifference which is quite edifying, and if I should meet him at Dulcote, I can always amuse myself by allusions to the profession he takes so much pains to sink out of sight. And now we must go down to release Mr. Erle from Jen.'

But Mr. Erle's patience was already exhausted, and he had left a message for Helen to join him in the gardens. As they walked

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home together, she was made happy by his satisfaction in hearing of Martha's gift; and since Mrs. Erle agreed with him, it was accepted by Helen with unalloyed pleasure.

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CHAPTER XIV.

PERHAPS the deeper interest of the approaching visit to Dulcote was a safeguard, or else Helen was less susceptible than her friend had imagined; at all events, Martha was satisfied that Mr. Benson's three days' visit had left no very dangerous impression on her mind. He returned to town, leaving the alterations at Ilex Lodge so far advanced that he was to take possession in the following week; and, as Mr. Erle observed, he sat very loose to his profession, so that no considerations of business seemed likely to interfere with the enjoyment of his new country house.

Not without some hurry and anxiety, the renovation of Helen's wardrobe was completed by the day appointed, and she came down to wait for the Elwood carriage, and to receive the farewell and the criticisms of the assembled family. Mr. Arnold was among the number, having just come over from Hedworth.

'Well!' said he, after a critical glance, 'you are what people call *bien mise*, and your

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bonnet is nice and fresh; but I don't see anything so remarkable in the dress. In fact, I seem to know it.'

'Of course you do, Uncle Ambrose,' said Helen, laughing, 'since I wore it for best all last summer. I shall only come forth in *the* gown to-morrow morning, for there is no need to look so very fine on arriving.'

'Nor much need to look fine at all.'

'I knew you would say so, Uncle Ambrose, but I really shall not look *smart*. Shall I, mamma?—only as well dressed as other people, since Miss Brown chose a dress that was quiet and not conspicuous. Now, do say that it was very good-natured of her!'

'I can go and tell her so, for there is the carriage,' said Ambrose.

'And your father is not ready,' said Mrs. Erle. 'He insisted on packing his own things, and so many people have come to see him this morning, that he has not had time to do it properly. I will go up and see that he does not leave half of them behind: and you must just tell Miss Brown, Ambrose, that he will be down in a minute.'

'And I shall go too,' said Helen, following him to the door, 'just to prove that it is

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not my fault that she is kept waiting this time.'

'Oh, Helen!' said Martha, and then her face brightened as she saw her companion, and she asked if Mr. Arnold was to be of their party.

'Oh dear, no!' replied Ambrose; 'I was only sent to explain that William is coming.'

'And as you *are* here, you will not refuse to wish us a pleasant visit?'

'Helen is so certain it will be pleasant, that the wish is almost superfluous.'

'It is a pity mamma will not go, and that you are not asked: then it would be all in the family,' observed Helen.

'I *was* asked to dine and sleep there to-night,' said Ambrose; and Helen answered quickly—

'Why, Uncle Ambrose, you never told us you were coming.'

'Because I declined the invitation, Helen. As I said the other night, I really cannot afford to go into society.'

Helen looked annoyed, and not Helen only. Martha leaned back in her corner of the barouche, and did not speak again until Mr. Erle came down. When they had driven off,

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Helen could not refrain from recurring to the subject, although a little embarrassed by Martha's presence.

'Papa, did you know that Sir Henry *did* ask uncle Ambrose, and that he refused because he says he will not go anywhere?'

'I really think,' said Mr. Erle, 'that your mother is right in saying that Ambrose grows more absurd and whimsical every day. He is going on here just as he did in London—thwarting every means of getting into better and paying practice.'

'If Mr. Arnold were here, I should think it my duty to agree with you,' said Martha; 'but in his absence I must say that he could scarcely devote himself more nobly.'

'That may be,' said Mr. Erle; 'and if virtue were its own reward, I should have nothing to say; but I do not admit that Ambrose tastes the pleasure which some men find in becoming martyrs. He always looks restless and dissatisfied.'

Martha did not reply, and was rather silent throughout the drive. In the Dulcote approach she was suddenly roused to animation as a dog-cart was driven rapidly past them, containing two gentlemen, one of whom lifted his hat.

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'There!' she exclaimed, 'I knew, I might have expected it; but I never thought you were in earnest, Helen. That was Lionel Benson.'

'And Richard Wentworth was driving,' added Mr. Erle; 'they must have come out of town together.'

'I have a great mind to set you down, and go home again,' said Martha.

The Erles all knew her well enough to offer no opposition, allowing her to work off her indignation in words.

'Really,' she continued, after a pause, 'it would exasperate a meeker spirit than mine, to be persecuted in this way. Perhaps I might induce him to bring an action against himself; he is attorney enough for anything.'

'Attorneys are a much maligned race,' said Mr. Erle.

'That they certainly are, if I wrong them in considering Lionel Benson a type of his craft. Now shall I go home, Mr. Erle? I should not in the least mind sending a message by you, or writing a note, to explain the true reason.'

'But I should mind it very much,' said Mr. Erle; 'so to oblige me, perhaps you will let the carriage drive on.'

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Poor Lady Wentworth had been really anxious to make the heiress's first visit to Dulcote agreeable, and little dreamed of the feelings with which she regarded one of the invited guests. She was, in fact, guiltless of the cause; and Mr. Wentworth had just introduced his friend, and explained that he had brought him down without giving any notice of his intention, on discovering that he had been long an acquaintance and was now a neighbour of Miss Brown's, when Martha and her friends were ushered in. After greeting the lady of the house, Mr. Erle and Helen shook hands with Lionel, but Martha drew back with a slight bow. Lady Wentworth was perplexed; and when Lionel walked to the window to look at the view, she said, in an under tone—

'Did I misunderstand my brother-in-law in saying you were acquainted with Mr. Benson?'

'Oh, yes, I know him; his father is my trustee,' rejoined Martha, without taking any pains to make her reply inaudible.

'Do look at this view, Miss Erle,' said Lionel, turning round. And Helen of course could not decline the invitation. When she stood beside him in the bay window, he said,

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with a smile of conscious triumph: 'Well, I have come to meet you.'

'Or Miss Brown?'

'*And* Miss Brown, perhaps; but she certainly has not come to meet me. Now I venture to hope that you do not regard me with the same enmity.'

'I do not care for myself,' said Helen, pointedly.

'Only for your friend? And as far as you are concerned, I may hope for indifference instead of enmity. Is not that a cheering prospect?'

'I do not see much to admire from this window,' said Helen, looking out; 'it is the flat side of the park.'

'I was not speaking of the view,' said Lionel, in a tone of genuine pique. He was not used to be baffled by a young lady, and especially by one so fresh and inexperienced, and it stimulated his desire to overcome the distrust or dislike with which Helen evidently regarded him.

Mr. Wentworth was a stranger to Helen, although known to her father; and she looked at him with some curiosity. He was a man under forty, with a good figure, and an intelli-

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gent, rather plain face; and when he addressed himself to Martha, Helen thought that it might have occurred to others as well as to Lionel Benson, that the acquaintance might lead to a not unsuitable marriage. Partly from loyalty to her uncle's cause, partly to escape from her present companion, she returned to her seat beside Martha. She was guiltless of interrupting very friendly conversation, for Martha was engaged in parrying the same remark which had been made by Lady Wentworth.

'It was quite by accident that I learned from Benson that his family and yours had long been intimate.'

'In a certain sense,' replied Martha. 'My uncle had rather intimate business relations with the firm of Benson and Son. You know they do a good deal of City business.'

Lionel might be excused for a little want of charity towards Miss Brown. This piece of family history was not given in quite so audible a tone as the last, yet it was plain enough that Lionel heard it, and winced a little from this public announcement of his profession, when he had come down into the country as a gentleman at large. Mr. Wentworth, however,

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showed no false pride, but espoused his cause in his reply—

'Well, Miss Brown, the family lawyer is very often the family friend.'

'I do not agree with you, Wentworth,' said Lionel, blandly. 'He generally knows too much to be a welcome visitor. There is only one person who ranks below him in that respect, and that is the family doctor.'

The sting of these words was felt both by Martha and Helen; and to Martha it was the first revelation that Lionel's suspicious watchfulness was directed to one person in particular. Although talking to Mr. Erle at the time, Lady Wentworth heard enough of what passed to suspect that her guests were not assimilating well, and she proposed to take Martha and Helen to their rooms, where she left them to prepare for dinner. Helen was well pleased to find a small dressing-room allotted to her, opening into Martha's more spacious apartment, with its large bed and silk hangings; and after giving a few directions to her maid, and desiring her to call her when it was time to dress, Martha shut herself into the smaller room with Helen, and the two girls sat down on the low, old-fashioned window-seat.

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'But even here I am not safe from my enemy,' said Martha, pointing to the grass-plot below, where stood Lionel and Richard Wentworth, the former proffering a light for his companion's cigar.

'I wish you would not make him your enemy,' said Helen, earnestly. 'I am sure he is dangerous.'

'I know he is.'

'Then why do you try to provoke him?'

'Because he provokes me. Do not let us talk of him, Helen. I came here with the rash hope of enjoying myself, and now I only wish I could go home this evening. Everything is hateful.'

'Do try to enjoy yourself,' said Helen, pleadingly; 'you will belong to Sir Henry at dinner, and I think Mr. Benson will try to keep out of your way, for you know you were not very civil to him.'

'I believe not. Your father would have been scandalized if he had heard all that passed, though you took it quietly. I applaud your tolerance, which is not in general the virtue of youth; only do not extend it to Lionel Benson, for that would be carrying virtue to an excess.'

Something on the same subject passed be-

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tween Lady Wentworth and her brother-in-law, who happened to be the first to appear in the drawing-room before dinner.

'Oh, Richard,' she said, reproachfully, 'I am sorry you brought that Mr. Benson down with you to-day. He seems to be a very unobjectionable young man, but it is evident that Miss Brown does not like him, and I am afraid it will increase the stiffness of this first visit.'

'I am not sure that it was a happy idea,' said Mr. Wentworth; 'but there is no doubt, though she chose to ignore it just now, that she and the Bensons *have been* very intimate, and Benson is a pleasant young fellow in his way, fairly gentlemanlike, and with plenty to say for himself. He told me a good deal of the Brown family history. The old man died worth so much, that the current report of her fortune is scarcely exaggerated, but I am afraid she has an infernal temper. However—'

The last clause was expressive, for though too well bred to put it into words, there was a tacit understanding among the Wentworths that Richard ought to profit by this opportunity of making acquaintance with the heiress. As Lionel had hinted, his younger brother's por-

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tion scarcely sufficed for the indulgence of rather expensive tastes, while his position and good abilities raised him above the imputation of mere fortune-hunting.

It was not easy to make acquaintance with Martha, at least in the mood in which she came down that evening, and a spectator might have observed with amusement how much attention Helen received in the rebound from her discouragement. Lionel, Mr. Wentworth, even Sir Henry, found relief in turning to one who looked smiling, and pretty, and self-possessed, ready to listen, and not unwilling to talk.

When Helen took her place at dinner between Mr. Wentworth and Lionel Benson, she was filled with virtuous indignation against the latter, but it was not revealed by her manner, and presently disappeared from her mind. There was a pleasant rivalry between the two gentlemen for her attention, as they talked to her, and across her, and she was inclined to think Mr. Benson the most agreeable of the two. As at the dinner party at which they had first met, they insensibly fell into confidential talk, and this time the confidence was on Helen's side.

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'I am afraid that what I am going to say will seem odd,' she began.

'Then say it by all means, Miss Erle; I like odd sayings.'

'Well, then, I hope you are not going to stay over to-morrow.'

'And why not?'

'Because we—papa, Miss Brown, and I—are going to stay for three nights, and it will quite spoil Miss Brown's visit if you are to be here too. As you must have known that before, I don't think it was quite fair of you to come.'

'Did she ask you to drive me away?'

'No,' said Helen; 'she would be very much annoyed if she knew that I was speaking about it.'

'Perhaps she has a faint perception of the unfairness on her side. Will you not allow, Miss Erle, that such bitter and unreasonable dislike shows that I am not the one to blame, for *I* do not shrink from meeting her, or from any accusation she may choose to make against me.'

'I suppose,' said Helen, 'that, as mamma says when the children quarrel, you are both wrong; but I mean to take Miss Brown's side, because I know her best.'

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'That is woman's justice,' rejoined Mr. Benson, laughing. 'Now I know that I have only to gain your good opinion in order to turn the scale the other way, and as a first step I will go away early to-morrow; *not* to gratify Miss Brown, but because you desire it.'

'No,' said Helen, drawing back a little; 'I did not say so; I only hoped that it would seem right and generous to yourself.'

'I am quite sensible of the generosity, Miss Erle, for I give up a good deal in cutting short a visit to which I had looked forward with pleasure. Miss Brown was *not* the object of my coming here.'

Helen was just conscious enough not to make a prompt reply, but Lionel's soft speeches were of too frequent occurrence to disconcert her; she did not quite believe, neither did she dislike them. It was Lionel who spoke again after a brief silence.

'I see that Mr. Erle's prediction that your uncle was to be asked here to-night is not fulfilled.'

'He was asked,' Helen replied, with some satisfaction; 'but he did not care to come.'

'Indeed! Did he decline to come, for the

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same reason for which you desire me to go—out of deference to Miss Brown?'

'I do not know what Miss Brown's wishes could have to do with it. At all events, he did not consult her, nor any of us.'

Mr. Benson smiled at Helen's defensive tone.

'There are two points, or persons, on whom I cannot touch without giving offence—Miss Brown and Mr. Arnold.'

'And for the same reason,' Helen replied with spirit; 'it is extremely disagreeable to hear you talk of any one, and especially of those I love, with a sneer or sarcasm.'

'I certainly was guiltless of either, as far as Mr. Arnold was concerned,' said Lionel, and here again the conversation dropped.

In the course of the evening he went up to Lady Wentworth, and Helen heard her polite expressions of regret that he was obliged to leave them so early on the morrow. He approached Helen next, and claimed the applause which she did not refuse to give, nor did it occur to her that there was anything indiscreet in allowing him to take such a step expressly as a concession to herself.

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CHAPTER XV.

IT so happened that Martha had not asked, and Helen had not volunteered, the information about Mr. Benson's movements; so that when the other guests met next morning at a rather late breakfast, Martha learned, with all the force of a pleasant surprise, that he had taken his departure early.

'He said he should breakfast at home—this cottage of his at Elwood,' said Mr. Wentworth, 'and I have promised to visit him there next week. He has the art of making himself comfortable; and I rather look forward to my visit.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Erle; 'I think he has spent more on the place than it is worth; and I could not make out if it was a whim of his own or his father's.'

'Of both,' said Martha, quietly. 'They are a model father and son—never quarrel, but always hunt in couples.'

'Hunt!' repeated Sir Henry, vaguely catching at the word, for his attention had been

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engaged elsewhere. 'I understood Mr. Benson to say that he had no taste for hunting.'

'He has a soul above foxes,' replied Martha, 'and aims at higher game.'

'Now, Miss Brown,' said Mr. Erle, in that tone of good-humoured authority to which she generally deferred, 'do let us talk in plain English, and not in double-edged sayings. We were speaking of Ilex Lodge, Sir Henry. Mr. Benson has been laying out money, and will make a neat thing of it. He seems to have quite a taste for improvements.'

'Ah, well,' replied Sir Henry. 'We shall be all the better for an improving neighbour. It puts us old proprietors on our mettle.'

Mr. Wentworth's smile was rather sarcastic, for Dulcote House had been built, and the grounds laid out, in the reign of George the First; and he had striven in vain to induce his brother to modify the dull and uniform mediocrity which distinguishes the style of that era.

Breakfast was over, but the party had not yet dispersed to their morning occupations or amusements, and were gathered in the anteroom watching Helen's attempts to entice a graceful and ladylike pea-hen to eat bread from

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her hand, when Mr. Erle pointed out a man on horseback coming up the approach.

'An early visitor for you, Sir Henry. I don't know what business he should have with you, nor is it like the man's figure, but the horse is absurdly like a brown cob I sold to my churchwarden, Farmer Lee, two years ago.'

'And *I* do not know about the horse,' said Martha, 'but the man is your own brother-in-law, Mr. Erle.'

'Ambrose?' Mr. Erle said, anxiously. 'I hope there is nothing wrong at home.' He hastily crossed the lawn, vaulted over the ha-ha which separated it from the carriage-road, and intercepted Ambrose before he reached the house. In another moment he shouted back to Helen, who had followed as far as she could, with a hearty laugh at his unnecessary alarm, 'All right, Helen. Your uncle thought this the fashionable hour for a morning visit.'

'Do not go round,' said Sir Henry, hospitably; 'I will send a man for your horse.' And accordingly Ambrose came up to the ha-ha, and stood there, bridle in hand, to justify the early visit.

'As I breakfasted three hours ago, it did not occur to me that it *was* early, so I borrowed

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a horse and came across country; and as it was inspiriting to find myself on my old friend the cob, I rode faster than I intended.'

'You could not do better,' said Sir Henry; 'and now you are here, I hope you will stay all day.'

This Ambrose declined; but when his horse was taken round to the stable, and he had come across the lawn into the drawing-room, he agreed without much demur to walk round the place, on finding that Sir Henry had already arranged to show Martha the gardens and hothouses. She and Helen were soon ready, and they set out with the four gentlemen. By chance, or instinct, or design, the order in which they started was presently reversed, and Martha found herself by Mr. Arnold's side, some paces behind the rest of the party. 'Helen is doing very well here,' she said.

'So it seems,' replied Ambrose. 'I am amused and rather surprised by her success in society. To us who know her well, she is very lovable, yet she certainly is not clever, nor even cultivated. As Miss Austin says of one of her heroines, she is even more ignorant and uninformed than the female mind usually is at seventeen.'

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Martha laughed and assented.

'She is pretty, however, which goes a long way. But I believe it is her *air capable* which makes her so attractive. She never looks foolish or utters a platitude because she is afraid to say what she thinks.'

'I do not think frankness is always attractive.'

'No. I contrive to make it very disagreeable. That was what you meant, Mr. Arnold.'

'No; I was thinking of myself. I never speak my mind, or even act upon my own convictions, without speaking, except at the cost of a storm of opposition.'

'Which Mr. Erle says you enjoy.'

'I have long discovered,' replied Ambrose, hastily, 'that a man is never so utterly misunderstood as by his nearest relations.'

'Well,' said Martha, with a smile which scarcely veiled an inward tremor, 'why not confide in a friend?'

'Because I have no friends.'

'*That* I do not believe. But if not to a friend, why not speak to an indifferent person —to *me?* It is hard to live without sympathy.'

'It *is* hard, Miss Brown. But if I told

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you of the trials which have so chafed and vexed my soul, you would bid me hold my peace for evermore.'

Ambrose spoke nervously, and one hurried glance revealed to Martha the strange light which gleamed in his eyes. But before she could reply, or could even feel that reply were possible, an unwelcome interruption came from Sir Henry.

'Now, Miss Brown, I must take you into this house, and show you the arrangement of these flues which answers so admirably.'

Martha followed Sir Henry into the forcing-house. The rest of the party found its atmosphere so stifling that they remained outside, and when they again emerged, Mr. Arnold was gone.

'He looked at his watch,' Mr. Erle explained, 'and muttered that he had forgotten something—an appointment, I suppose—and then he went off like a shot. Pray do not make *me* responsible for my brother-in-law's shortcomings in politeness, Sir Henry.'

'We do not expect politeness from a busy man,' said Sir Henry, courteously. 'I hope to see more of Mr. Arnold at some other time.'

How Martha got through that walk she

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could not herself have told, but she looked and spoke like other people, and on their return home went to the drawing-room to tell Lady Wentworth what they had seen and done. Helen had gone straight upstairs to write to her mother, and had filled one page with reproaches to her Uncle Ambrose for going off in such a hurry, instead of waiting to carry her letter, when she was startled by sounds in the adjoining room. She paused, and listened for the deep-drawn sobs which presently recurred again, and she doubted no longer, though she could not divine the cause of Martha's distress. Afraid that it would seem like impertinent curiosity, Helen checked the first impulse to enter, but she could not long restrain herself. She knocked, and scarcely waited for permission to open the door. Martha had thrown off her bonnet, and seated herself at the table. Her face was turned away, and partly shaded by her hand, yet the traces of tears were too fresh to be mistaken.

'Well?' said Martha, almost in her natural voice.

'From what I heard, I was afraid you might be ill, or that something was the matter.'

'The sun was hot. No,' Martha added,

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abruptly, 'there is no use lying: Mr. Arnold spoke strangely, and agitated me a little; and that is all about it.'

Not all—nor the half of those tumultuous thoughts with which Martha's heart was swelling—so at least Helen guessed, but she felt that she had no right to press for greater confidence. She stooped and kissed Martha for the first time in her life, before turning to leave the room, and then she was detained by a strong hand, and compelled to sit down on the sofa.

'It is best to have it out, is it not, Helen?'

'Much better, if you do not mind.'

'Well, then, you shall hear. Long ago—that is, nearly a year ago—I first saw Mr. Arnold, when he came to see my uncle. He did not merely visit him as a patient, for my uncle, though he disagreed with him, had a strange sort of fancy for his society, and would hold him in talk for an hour together, while I sat by and listened. It was the first time I had come in contact with a nature which was not sordid and base, nor false and heartless. I saw that his life had a purpose which was not money-getting, and a hope which was not earthly.'

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'That is true of Uncle Ambrose,' said Helen, with kindling eyes. 'Papa says that when he fails it is only from aiming too high.'

'He does not fail,' replied Martha. 'Mr. Arnold's manner was unlike what it is now—gentler, more even, and especially to me. So at least I fancied; and that he liked to talk to me, and to influence my opinions. Suddenly the change came, either through insinuations from without or consciousness within, and he became cold, and distant, and reserved; he scarcely spoke to me, even in my uncle's presence, and would not linger for a few minutes' talk after we left the sick room. The pain I felt first betrayed the truth—that I had not admired only, nor esteemed, but *loved* him; believing that he also loved me, and for myself alone. However, I thought I could bear the disappointment which so many have borne before. We never met after my uncle's death, and I came down here, confident in my power to forget the short dream of happiness. But your connexion with him awoke the irresistible longing to see him once more; and though it was only to be pained by his bitterness, and repelled by his coldness, I could not bring myself to regret having brought him here. In the few words

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which he spoke to-day, there was a sadness, and passion, and sweetness, which I dare not interpret for myself. Tell me, Helen, what does it mean?'

'I suppose,' said Helen, 'that he also has striven to conquer the love which he dared not confess.'

'And why should he fear?'

'Perhaps he is more afraid of the world than of what *you* would say,' said Helen. 'You know that Ambrose has nothing, or less than nothing. His education swallowed up what he had to start with, which was very little.'

'Whether he has more or less, signifies little where one has enough for both; it is only a cruel pride that estranges us,' said Martha, bitterly.

'You must not blame him,' said Helen. 'I am only guessing, for he has never spoken or hinted at what I tell you, and perhaps it was wrong to say it. Only I *must* just say that I feel sure that what I wish so much will one day come to pass.'

Again she kissed Martha; and then, flushed and agitated, she returned to her own room, to think over what had passed. Her letter to her

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mother was confused and incoherent enough, and did not betray Martha's secret, but the same post carried the following note to her uncle.

'My dear Uncle Ambrose,

'Perhaps you will think me impertinent to meddle, especially as I do not know what you said to Miss Brown this morning; but it has troubled her, and I suppose it was too much or too little. We shall be at home early on Thursday, and I hope you will go to Elwood in the afternoon.'

'Your affectionate niece,

'Helen Erle.

'Miss Brown does not know that I am writing.'

Not another word passed on the subject during the remainder of their visit to Dulcote. Helen sometimes looked preoccupied, but Martha was just as usual, not invariably gracious, but to all appearance cheerful. Lady Wentworth had invited several of her neighbours to dine or stay in the house, and on all of them Martha made a very fair impression; they said, indeed, that she was 'rather peculiar,'

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but a good deal of peculiarity can be forgiven in either man or woman who is rich, unmarried, and young. Mr. Wentworth summed up the general opinion in his observation to his brother—

'I wish, however, that it was the little one, Miss Erle, who had the money, for she is really *piquante* and pretty; and I am always afraid of a woman with black eyebrows.'

At the time this remark was made, Martha had set down Helen and her father at the parsonage, and was driving home; and while Helen satisfied her mother's curiosity to hear all particulars of their visit, she was thinking much more about Ambrose and his love affairs, whether she had done well to write that note, and if he would do wisely to act upon it.

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CHAPTER XVI.

MARTHA'S history of the visit to Dulcote was more concise than the one which Helen was called upon to give.

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Jenkins, 'I am quite glad to see you home again, and I hope you have enjoyed yourself.'

'I did not enjoy myself at all,' replied Martha, 'and I am in too bad a temper to tell you about it now; but perhaps I shall be better after luncheon. What have you to tell me? Of course, Lionel Benson has been here to spy out the land in my absence.'

'I am glad you say of course, my dear, as I was afraid it would annoy you when you heard of his visit. I had no idea that he was in the country, or I might have kept out of the way; but he walked in, and took me quite by surprise.'

'And what line did his mischief-making take?'

'We talked a little about old times, and then of all the Erle family.'

'Including Mr. Arnold?'

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'Yes; I think he spoke of him.'

'Well—he may talk,' said Martha; and then she asked no more.

The two ladies had just finished luncheon when the servant announced that Mr. Arnold was in the drawing-room. Mrs. Jenkins might have observed that Martha turned pale, but there was nothing in her voice which betrayed agitation.

'Very well; I will go to him. If I do not bring him in to luncheon, Jen, you may conclude that he has come on business; so do not let the servants interrupt us.'

Ambrose stood with one hand on the great marble chimney-piece, in a position which constrained Martha to face the light when she sat down, while he remained standing as before.

'I have just left Helen and Mr. Erle at home,' said Martha, straining every nerve to speak unconcernedly.

'I came to see *you*, Miss Brown—to speak, if you will; or even now, if you bid me, to hold my peace.'

'No!' said Martha, steadily; 'it is better that we should understand each other.'

'I do not even understand myself,' said

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Ambrose. 'I do not know what I hope or fear. Were I richer, or you poorer, I should have spoken long ago; but, as we are, it is mere madness. Yet Helen said that my rash words had troubled you: and if you are troubled, then not indifferent.'

'Not indifferent,' replied Martha, proudly, 'but able to bear indifference, and even dislike, better than an unwilling confession, as I now understand this to be.'

'Yet hear me,' said Ambrose, speaking with low and rapid utterance. 'Again and again I put the thought from me that in your stronger nature mine would find completeness; for I could not, I cannot now, endure to have it said that I sought to mend my broken fortunes by a rich marriage. I have tried to forget love in hatred; to teach you also by my rough words to hate me. And now the strife has ended, like every other conflict between my weakness and my will—in defeat. I must say once, and then never more, I love you!'

'And the happiness of two lives is to be sacrificed to fear of the world's censure?' said Martha.

'Of *two* lives?' Ambrose repeated.

'Yes, Mr. Arnold. For me, as for you,

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there was happiness in store, which I certainly shall now never taste.'

'You love me!' said Ambrose, grasping the hand which Martha instantly withdrew.

'How can you—how *dare* you exact the humiliating confession after what you have already said? Now, Mr. Arnold, let us part.'

'Not so,' said Ambrose. 'In the consciousness of that love, I can dare all things—even the scorn of man. Say it yet again—what I can say a thousand times and never tire—I love you!'

Martha said nothing, but the tears which rained down were eloquent enough; and her hand was not again withdrawn, although Ambrose took and raised it to his lips. Timid, shrinking, and bashful, Martha's very nature seemed changed by the strangeness and the sweetness of this first token of requited love.

Both sat still awhile, then spoke to breathe the names with which their lips were still unfamiliar—'Martha,' 'Ambrose,' then paused again. At length Ambrose spoke:—

'You are mine now. Will you think me a cowardly and faint-hearted lover, if I tell you what I wish to do?'

Martha replied by a smile of perfect trust.

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'Let it be an engagement between ourselves, not declared to all the world. We each stand alone, with neither father nor mother to whom we owe duty, and we can trust each other. Let us wait a year, and in that time I shall achieve success, working with a purpose and a steadiness which has hitherto been wanting; and I shall be in a position to claim you before all the world.'

Even at such a moment, the absurdity of supposing that twelve months' practice as a country surgeon could make any great difference in their relative position and means, was sufficiently evident to Martha's practical mind; and divided between the fear of wounding Ambrose, and the sense of what was right, her answer was unwillingly given:—

'I will wait a year—twenty years, if you please.'

'If I please,' Ambrose repeated, reproachfully.

'Well, if you think it best; and I see no necessity for declaring the engagement generally; but the Erles ought to be told.'

'I should not mind telling Helen; but William and Amy are so unreasonable, and take up wrong all that I do.'

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'Never mind that,' replied Martha, with a bright smile; 'you know you will not now stand alone. I should not think it right to entrust a girl of Helen's age with that sort of secret, and indeed I feel sure she would insist on telling her mother; so that it will save trouble in the end to go direct to the higher powers.'

'Then promise that you will not be swayed by what they say.'

'I promise to do exactly as you wish.'

'And to think it right?' said Ambrose, imploringly.

'Right for me, because your will must now be mine,' said Martha, with so much brightness and sweetness that Ambrose must indeed have been hard to please if he had not been satisfied.

'I, too, must make my conditions,' she said, presently. 'If our engagement is not declared, it should not be even surmised, and I must be the judge of how often or how seldom it will be prudent to meet. You may think me overcautious, but you do not know Lionel Benson, or how hard it is to elude his suspicious watchfulness. Even now he suspects something, though why I cannot imagine.'

'Only because he feels that none can know without loving you,' said Ambrose; and the

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answer closed Martha's lips again. She could not talk rationally any more, but listened, not unwillingly, to very irrational raptures, until even Ambrose felt that the interview must have an end.

'And you will tell Mr. Erle?' said Martha.

'No; I must go home now, and I wish you to do it, and to tell him all we have settled. He likes you, and does not cordially like me, so that he will take it better from you.'

'Take it better,' repeated Martha, with a smile; 'will it be such a very terrible revelation?'

'I do not know. Nothing that I have done yet has pleased my relations; so that I can scarcely hope to please them in my marriage.'

'I am not afraid to undertake the disclosure.'

'Then tell them this afternoon, and I will go over to-morrow to see how they take it, and enforce secresy. And perhaps I may come on here.'

'Certainly you may not. Possibly, but not probably, I may meet you at the parsonage. If the secret is to be kept at all, a meeting once a week there, and about once a month here, is the very utmost which I think desirable. But I will talk about that to Mr. and Mrs. Erle.'

'You know you are to be guided by me.'

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'Not on *that* point.' Then, observing the cloud on Ambrose's brow, Martha added, gently, 'You must not, Mr. Arnold, let me think you exacting this very first day.'

'Then say Ambrose.'

'Good-bye, Ambrose.' And with no excuse for lingering, Ambrose left the room. Martha went to the window to watch for his appearance, and drew back with a deep blush when the same impulse induced him to pause and look up. 'I am a fool to love so madly,' she murmured; then adding with a proud confidence, 'yet none have loved more worthily.'

Two hours afterwards she was in Mr. Erle's study, to whom she thought it more easy to make her confession than to his wife, or even than to Helen. Mr. Erle, engaged in clearing off the arrears of correspondence which had gathered in his absence, looked up in some surprise.

'It is you, Miss Brown. *I* did not expect to see *you* again to-day.'

'Nor did I to see you when we parted; but I have something important to say.'

'Nothing disagreeable, I hope.'

'I do not know what it may be to you. We—Mr. Arnold and I—are very happy.'

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'You do not mean to say,' exclaimed Mr. Erle, in great excitement, 'that Helen was right, after all?'

'I believe that Helen had partly guessed the truth; but you are the first to know of our engagement.'

'Then it is absolutely settled?' said Mr. Erle, getting up and shaking Martha cordially by the hand. 'Well, I must say that Ambrose is a very lucky fellow.'

'Lucky is a poor word, Mr. Erle.'

'I do not mean merely in the money point of view. He could not do better for himself in every way.'

'That I like,' said Martha, while the tears stood in her eyes. 'I so yearned for the voice to wish me joy.'

'I was wishing him joy first, Miss Brown, yet not because your happiness does not interest me nearly as much. Ambrose is a noble fellow at bottom, with all his faults on the surface; and now that he has chosen so wisely, he will do well in the world.'

'That does not please me so well,' said Martha. 'Your praise has too much condescension in it, which *he* does not need. But I have not finished my story yet. You must

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not go and publish the great news in all the cottages, for our engagement is not to be declared for a year at least. It is to be a profound secret, known only to you and Mrs. Erle and Helen.'

Mr. Erle indulged in one long whistle, expressive of dissatisfaction. 'This,' said he, 'is some notable scheme of Ambrose's.'

'It was settled between us,' said Martha, colouring.

'That of course; but it was suggested by one, though for what object it is hard to see.'

'Mr. Arnold wishes it,' said Martha; 'and when there is so much to mortify him, I cannot refuse to please him in this one thing.'

Mr. Erle could not forbear laughing. 'On many points,' he said, 'Ambrose has peculiar views; but really, this idea of mortification is perfectly unique.'

'You must not laugh,' rejoined Martha, with spirit; 'or, at all events, ridicule will not move us. On this condition alone our engagement stands.'

'Ambrose had no right to make such a stipulation, and I really do not like to agree to it. I will not tease you further, but I must talk to himself, and know his reasons.'

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'*I* know his reasons, and am satisfied,' said Martha, hastily; 'is not that enough?'

'Hardly, Miss Brown. Some friend ought to act for you; your trustee, for example.'

'*Any one* but him, Mr. Erle. If you object to our marriage, you cannot do better than give the Bensons a year's notice, and they will find some means of putting an end to it.'

'We will not quarrel about it,' said Mr. Erle, kindly. 'I suppose we ought to consider you and Ambrose competent to manage your own affairs, and I hope all will do well. But if the engagement is declared a year hence, I having known it all along, I do not think it will be much to my credit. We shall be accused of match-making, and Ambrose of fortune-hunting.'

'It is for the very purpose of avoiding such an aspersion that we wish the engagement to be a secret.'

'Exactly. I supposed it to be some such notion. But the straightest road is always the shortest; declare your engagement, and it will be a nine days' wonder, and there an end. Make a mystery of it, and the tongues will never cease wagging.'

'I have promised,' said Martha; 'and

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Ambrose knows best what will satisfy him. You must wish him joy heartily, and with no drawback.'

'If I do, it is only to please you, Miss Brown.'

'You are to call me Martha, now, except before strangers.'

'No,' said Mr. Erle, bluntly; 'I cannot call you one thing at one time, and another at another. I leave that to Ambrose.'

The most difficult and painful task was over in this interview with Mr. Erle. His wife was too sensible of her brother's great good fortune to lament the conditions with which he himself had clogged it; while Helen was joyously triumphant over the successful issue of her romance, and only deplored the ingratitude of Ambrose in going home without acknowledging her share in bringing it about.

'He will be here to-morrow,' said Martha.

'Yes. I am so impatient to see him; and to see you together. You *will* come here?'

Martha demurred, but not after the same wish had been expressed by Mr. Erle. And when an appointment had been made, she set out on her solitary walk home, happy, but rather harassed, and with her heart bewildered by a world of new sensations.

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CHAPTER XVII.

MR. ARNOLD'S morning attendance on his patients could not, as the Erles had anticipated, admit of an early visit to the parsonage; and when he arrived at twelve, Martha was there before him. Both coloured deeply, as their hands met for the first time before the eyes of others, but Ambrose looked the most fluttered of the two. Helen gave her uncle a very affectionate kiss, and discreetly retreated, and Mr. Erle said—

'Are we to go to my study, Ambrose, or have our talk out here?'

'It will be rather an idle ceremony to retire,' said Ambrose, laughing, 'since Amy will inevitably hear all that passes second-hand.'

'And Miss Brown nothing,' said Mr. Erle. A retort which made Ambrose blush again.

'I do not know,' he said, 'that there is much to talk of. It will be time enough to discuss our plans some months hence, for Martha has told you that we do not mean to

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marry, not even to declare our engagement, at present.'

'She told me that this was your intention.'

'No I did not,' said Martha, quickly. 'I told you that it was settled between us.'

'Well, we need not dispute about words. All I have to say is, that whichever of you pleases to take the credit of it, it is a very foolish scheme.'

'I warned Martha,' rejoined Ambrose, in the tone of an injured person, 'that we must not hope to please you by our marriage.'

'Nothing would please me better than your marriage. All I object to is its postponement.'

'Now, Mr. Erle,' said Martha, recovering all her habitual coolness and self-possession, in her anxiety to defend Ambrose, 'I do not think such *very* great eagerness to conclude the bargain quite consistent with your fear of being considered a match-maker.'

'I do not wish for any unseemly haste, Miss Brown. All I urge is that the engagement should be publicly declared, and of a proper and convenient length. I must speak plainly where I feel strongly, and I warn Ambrose that by enforcing secresy he places you in a difficult and painful position, in which he has

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no right to place any woman, least of all the one whom he professes to love.'

An embarrassed silence followed. Martha looked troubled, Ambrose indignant, and even Mrs. Erle was inclined to think that her husband spoke too strongly.

'It is not quite fair to begin so uncomfortably,' she said. 'At the outset of an engagement people have a right to expect that all shall be smooth and pleasant.'

'It is better to begin uncomfortably than to end so,' said Mr. Erle. And though Ambrose still looked angry, Martha could not help laughing.

'You have delivered your testimony, Mr. Erle, and will not be responsible for whatever mischief may ensue. I am *quite* determined to keep the secret as long as Ambrose wishes it to be kept, but it can only be done in one way. We must never correspond, meet very seldom, and be very cool and polite, except in this family party.'

'I cannot see the least risk in corresponding,' said Ambrose.

'So I suppose,' said Martha, with a conscious smile, since she had received her first letter by that morning's post. 'But I am sure it is a

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wise restriction. Do you not think so, Mr. Erle?'

'If anything can be wise under the circumstances,' he replied.

'Well,' said Ambrose, impatiently, 'I will agree to anything, though I think you overcautious. But this first morning I must see you alone for five minutes. You will not object to *that*.'

Before Martha could reply, Helen, who had been wandering in the garden, impatiently waiting for her recal to the drawing-room, came up and tapped at the window, and when Mr. Erle opened it, she stepped hastily in, saying—

'Mr. Benson is coming up to the front door.'

'He will guess all the truth if he finds us both here,' said Martha, in great agitation.

'Why should he?' replied Ambrose. But instead of answering, Martha said that she would go upstairs with Helen, and they left the room at once.

'There,' observed Mr. Erle, before Mr. Benson was announced, 'it is to such subterfuges that you intend to expose your future wife.' And the unanswerable remark was further confirmed by the hasty movement with

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which Mrs. Erle concealed Martha's hat, which she had left upon the table, conspicuous by its long black feather.

Martha herself remembered the omission as soon as she got upstairs.

'That will betray all,' she said; 'and Ambrose will think me so weak and cowardly to have run away. He cannot understand, and I scarcely like to tell him, that I fear Lionel Benson almost as much as I dislike him. I know that he will come between us, and prevent our marriage if he can.'

'I do not think he will,' said Helen, cheerfully. 'Now that you are so happy yourself, you will have less time to think of Mr. Benson. But it *is* rather awkward about the hat; shall I go down to see if it is in sight?'

'We shall hear soon enough,' said Martha. 'If he does know that I am in the house, perhaps Ambrose will feel it right to declare our engagement, and I believe that is best, although I do not choose your father to say so.'

Meanwhile, Ambrose, after one or two restless movements, asked his sister if Helen was upstairs, and scarcely waited for an affirmative reply, before making his escape. He came straight into Mrs. Erle's sitting-room, saying—

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'Now, Helen, you may go; only not downstairs, for I am supposed to be with you.'

Helen laughed, and good humouredly complied with the unceremonious dismissal, which obliged her to go to her own room, and sit there without occupation. Ambrose threw himself at Martha's feet, and laid her cool, fresh hand on his burning forehead.

'This, dearest,' he whispered, 'shall bring peace, when there is so much to vex and annoy.'

'I do not think what Mr. Erle said ought to vex us,' said Martha; 'he wishes us to do as he thinks right,—what perhaps *is* right.'

'You promised to trust me, Martha.'

'I *do* trust you, wholly. If nothing that Mr. Erle has said has moved you, I shall be satisfied that you know best.'

'Why should it move me, when he has not even asked my reasons for not wishing to declare our engagement at once? It is only for a short time; for now I feel so hopeful, so confident, that I shall at last achieve success. And, after all, if I am to obey your stern decrees, I shall be the greatest sufferer; shall I not, my dearest?'

Endearing words from those lips had a power at which Martha wondered and was ashamed,

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in overruling all scruples. But the 'stern decrees' she again enforced, and Ambrose unwillingly promised compliance. Occasionally, but only occasionally, letters, under cover to Helen, might be exchanged between them. On Sundays they were to meet at the parsonage, and once a month Ambrose might pay a formal visit to the Manor,—'*about* once a month,' Martha repeated, when Ambrose began to express his preference for lunar over calendar months.

'But all this while,' said Martha, suddenly, 'if my hat and ostrich-feather are on the drawing-room table, we are like the lawful owner of the feather, only hiding our heads in the sand. Lionel Benson is lawyer enough to draw his conclusions from slighter premises.'

'No,' said Ambrose, laughing; 'we are safe enough this time. Amy, with immense promptitude, shut it up in her work-table.'

Martha laughed too, but with less lightness of heart. A faint misgiving, which seemed disloyal to her lover, could not be wholly overcome, that this enjoyment of the trifling deceit was not worthy of the man whose unflinching truthfulness and high principle had first won her heart.

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After all, they were not, with an *enfant terrible* in the house, so secure from suspicion as Ambrose had asserted. Before Mr. Benson's visit was at an end, Pippin came in, and after casting his eyes round the room, he asked, in the clear, audible voice of childhood :—

'Why, where are all the others gone?'

'Helen and your uncle Ambrose are upstairs,' said Mrs. Erle, fully expecting the next inquiry to concern Miss Brown, whom the child had seen on her arrival.

'Run up to Helen, and ask her to take your lessons, as I shall not have time for them this morning.'

Pippin was disposed to linger, and ask further questions, but he could not disregard his father's more peremptory mandate, 'Off with you, Pippin,' and promptly disappeared. It might have been some solace to his wounded spirit to know how unwelcome his entrance was to the occupiers of the sitting-room.

'Oh, mamma said Helen was here, and that I was to do my lessons,' Pippin observed in a rather aggrieved tone.

'But Helen is not here; so you may go downstairs again,' said Ambrose.

'Papa told me not; but I suppose it will

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do, if I say that you and Miss Brown sent me.'

'It will not do at all,' rejoined Ambrose, detaining him with a strong arm. 'Is Mr. Benson here still?'

'Yes; but I think he looked as if he was just going to go.' And the wisdom of Pippin's reply was justified by the closing of the house door. Martha peeped cautiously out, and saw Mr. Erle escorting his visitor to the garden gate.

'There!' said she. 'Now I shall go home.'

'Not just this moment,' said Ambrose.

'We will go downstairs, at all events.' And as Martha was resolute on this point, they went down together, and entered the drawing-room at the same moment as Mr. Erle. 'Good-bye,' said Martha, holding out her hand; 'I am going home, and you must not think or speak too hardly of me when I am not here to defend myself.'

'I do not think hardly of *you*, only of everybody else concerned. We have told, or implied, as many lies as could well come out of one well-regulated family; and it is a very nice preparation for writing my Sunday's sermon, to which I must now betake myself.'

'We may walk a little way together,' said

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Ambrose, resolved not to hear or reply to Mr. Erle's unpleasant truths.

'To the garden gate,' said Martha; and on this point also she had her way.

'Well,' said Ambrose, in those few paces; 'to-morrow is Friday, and on Sunday we shall meet; and perhaps I may send a little line by this evening's post for Helen to take to you. It will be a weary state of things while it lasts; but that will not be long, if I can only get a start in my profession.'

'Good-bye,' said Martha, brightly, carrying home a precious possession of sweet sayings which were to sustain her until their next meeting. Ambrose felt less cheerful, and went up to seek Helen in the sitting-room, from which the luckless Pippin was again ejected, in order that he might secure from her the approbation and sympathy which was so obstinately withheld by the elders of the family. Carried away by her uncle's enthusiasm, Helen was quite willing to accept his view of life, and to consider his scheme of earning not merely a name but a fortune by his profession, as wise and practicable as it was generous.

Mrs. Erle meanwhile was reproving her husband for his too vehement opposition.

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'You know,' she said, 'that it only makes Ambrose more obstinate; and I am convinced that if you leave them alone, the thing will soon settle itself. He will grow weary of the restrictions which she has very wisely imposed, and then the engagement will be declared.'

'Or she will grow weary of his impracticable folly: that is just as likely,' said Mr. Erle.

'I hope not,' replied the wife, anxiously. 'I don't mean to be worldly-minded, and I should never have sought this piece of good fortune, but since it has come to us, let us make the best of it. Ambrose is madly in love, poor fellow; and she is the very woman to guide him, and make him happy.'

'Yes; that is very well, provided he reaches his good fortune by straight ways, and not by crooked. I wish I knew what was right in the matter,' Mr. Erle added, looking really perplexed, for he was not much given to questions of casuistry. 'I am inclined to tell Miss Brown that it is my duty to inform her trustee of the engagement, with or without her consent.'

Mrs. Erle strongly opposed this intention.

'It is not,' she said, 'as if she were on friendly terms with the Bensons; but she dislikes and distrusts them both. Helen knows,

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or fancies, that the son wanted to marry her.'

'Well, he has changed his mind now, at all events,' said Mr. Erle; 'at least, *I* fancy he is looking after your daughter. I suspected it at Dulcote; and you must have noticed his disappointment that she did not show this morning. However, that is by the way. I do not feel sure that it would be fair to tell Mr. Benson, especially as Miss Brown looked so distressed when I proposed it yesterday. I must make one more appeal to Ambrose, though I might as well talk reason to a whirlwind, and then leave the young people to their own devices.' And here the dinner-bell put an end to the discussion.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

LOOKING young, and bright, and joyous, on good terms with all the world, and graciously disposed towards his unfeeling and wrong-headed relations, Mr. and Mrs. Erle, Ambrose came into the parsonage garden on Sunday morning, soon after the chimes began, that is to say, half an hour before service. Martha was there, according to appointment, *in case* he should find time to come; and it did just cross her mind that such an early appearance might not be quite consistent with his Hedworth duties, for on other Sundays he had found it difficult to get even the afternoon free. And indeed, if the truth were known, one or two of the old people who had hitherto been delighted by the patient ear the young doctor lent to the history of all their symptoms, were mortified by the hurry and inattention with which he had listened that morning to the most detailed account of 'a worriting in my inside, and a tea-kettle in my head, and a cracking and shooting in my bones, and a

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trembling and an aching all over, which do make me feel bad, sure.' Such complaints, which Ambrose had been wont to construe into a description more intelligible to the patient, as well as to himself, were cut short with a hasty, 'Yes, yes, I see what it is. I will send something to do you good.'

'Ah, well, we hopes so,' one old woman said, discontentedly, as he hastily vanished. 'But he's young and hearty, and does not know what we old folks suffer. How should he, when he flies in and out like a puff of smoke?'

Partly guessing the truth, Martha could not forbear to hint her fear, when the first happy greeting was over.

'I came because you told me,' she said, 'but I did not in the least expect you to come before service. You must have very few sick just now.'

'Not many,' replied Ambrose. 'I only made a short round this morning, and I shall have to pay some visits when I go back. And then, you know, this is our healthy season. In autumn or winter there is sure to be some epidemic to keep my hands fully employed.'

'You say so with a ghastly cheerfulness,' said Martha, smiling.

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'No, I do not wish people to fall sick; I only wish to cure them. I am growing horribly avaricious, Martha, of work and money—of whatever is to accomplish our happiness. I am ready to become Mr. Worldly Wiseman, to do anything which will gain me popularity and practice; and to-morrow I shall make a round of complimentary visits to all the farmers. But I told you that in my note last night; has Helen given it you?'

'I have not seen Helen yet. They had all gone to the Sunday school before I got here.'

'All but the terrible infant,' said Ambrose, as Pippin appeared on the lawn, and justified the name by his first remark—

'Why, Uncle Ambrose, how early you are; and Miss Brown, too! Why did you both come so soon?'

'That is an uncivil question, Pippin, which does not deserve a civil answer. I did not come to see you.'

'Well,' said Pippin, rather shrewdly, 'there is never any one else to see between breakfast and church. Rose and Mary take classes at the school now.'

'I certainly did not come to see Rose and Mary.'

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'Then I suppose you came to see Miss Brown.'

'Now, Mr. Arnold,' said Martha, low and reproachfully, 'do you call this prudent?'

'I call it provoking,' rejoined Ambrose, in the same under tone, 'that Pippin or any one else should oblige you to say "Mr. Arnold" in the only half-hour of the week when you are to be mine wholly. Why do you not get ready for church?' he added, turning to the child.

'I am ready,' said Pippin, rather hurt that his uncle should be insensible to his Sunday cap and rose-coloured neckerchief. 'I have my prayer-book, and Rose found my places before she went to school.'

Ambrose could only shrug his shoulders, and ejaculate once more, 'Oh, terrible infant!'

'I am not an infant, Uncle Ambrose. That means a baby, in the prayer-book.'

'But in the parsonage garden,' rejoined Ambrose, in the mock-serious tone by which he so often bewildered his unfortunate nephew, 'it means a little boy who is troublesome, and always in the way.'

Pippin opened his round eyes, and, after a thoughtful pause, accepted the moral, and walked rather disconsolately into the house.

'Poor boy!' said Martha; 'that was rather

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a shame, and goes far to prove the assertion that all lovers are selfish.'

'It is all for his good,' said Ambrose, gaily. 'Young people must learn betimes not to be obtrusive; and I will console him after service when we go to let Nero loose. Now tell me about yourself, Martha; you look well, so well, and yet rather paler than usual. I sometimes fear that the length and uncertainty of our engagement will wear you out.'

His earnest, anxious tone made Martha smile.

'You must indeed have a poor opinion of my endurance, if you think I am already beginning to tire of it.'

'This is only the third day,' said Ambrose, 'but to me it seems more like three years, blessed, happy years, so full of life. I had more talk with William after you went away; I kept my temper beautifully, but I think I convinced him that arguments were not of the slightest use;' which indeed he had.

'I must tell you what troubles me a little,' said Martha, timidly, for the greatness of her love made her fearful to offend; 'I want you to be more prudent. Sending away Pippin just now may make the servants wonder, and

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indeed people passing along the lane to church can see us.'

'What matter if they do? Every one knows that you and the Erles meet most days of the week.'

'Yes, but you are not an Erle.'

'If I am not Bran, I am Bran's brother,' retorted Ambrose. Then, as Martha still looked troubled, he said, 'Come into the house, then. You are not angry with me, my dearest?'

They went into the drawing-room, and there she satisfied him that she was not angry; but although she had smiled at the imputation, there was no doubt that these three days' engagement *had* worn and wearied her. The burden of secresy was oppressive, and already it seemed that her more restrained nature might scarcely satisfy the requirements of his ardent, enthusiastic love. Much has been said of the poetry and the charm of an engagement, and yet it is probably a time of which the pains infinitely outweigh the pleasures. Two people of strong affections and widely differing dispositions apply themselves to the task of understanding each other at a moment when their moods are most variable, their tempers most exacting, and when their sensitiveness to any

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slight, or coldness, or want of perfect understanding, is unnaturally keen. I do not say that this was as yet the case with Martha and Ambrose, but the little cloud had arisen which might presently overspread the horizon.

As Ambrose had predicted, there could be no more seclusion when the Sunday school was over. One by one the different members of the family dropped in, including Rose and Mary, who were not in the secret, and who, as even Ambrose was forced to admit, were quite sharp-witted enough to discover it. So he virtuously retreated to the other side of the room, looked at his watch, and observed that the church clock was more wildly wrong than usual, and that it was really past eleven.

'Well, there is the surplice-bell,' said Mr. Erle; 'and seven minutes is no such great miscalculation in the country. Mr. Benson said that our time was rather slow. And, by the way, Miss Brown, who do you think was helping me with the boys this morning?'

'It is not difficult from the context to guess that it was Lionel Benson,' replied Martha. 'Otherwise I should have said he was the most unlikely man in the world to turn Sunday-school teacher.'

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'I thought it would surprise you; but he offered his services, and did it very well too; did he not, Helen?' For Helen also taught in the boys' school.

'He was more amusing than instructive,' said Helen, laughing. 'The attention of my class was quite distracted by the story of Androcles and the Lion, which he was telling *à propos* of Daniel.'

'Well, he kept them quiet—that is the great point,' said Mr. Erle. 'I must be off. Run, Mary, and look for my sermon in the pigeon-hole of my standing-desk.'

The rest of the family soon followed, and Ambrose and Martha did *not* go in together. Ambrose felt that an exceptional and ostentatious sacrifice to discretion might justify the most systematic disregard of its dictates.

After service, Lionel Benson attached himself to the Erle party, and entered the parsonage-garden with them. Helen felt guilty, as though she had invited him—which certainly was not the case—and looked anxiously at Martha, who, however, had learned caution, if not charity, and betrayed no discomposure. She shook hands with Mr. Benson, and suffered him to walk by her side, and he began the conversa-

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tion with some allusion to his morning's occupation.

'Yes,' said Mr. Erle from behind, 'I thought you did very well for the first attempt; but Helen is critical, and says that you were too amusing.'

'I shall be very glad to take a lesson in teaching from Miss Erle. You cannot think,' added Lionel, addressing himself to Martha, 'how curious it was to see the order in which Miss Erle was able to keep those great rough lads.'

Martha could have cried 'Fudge!' with Mr. Burchell, but Mr. Erle was less insensible to any compliment to the daughter he loved so well.

'Helen does very fairly,' he said; 'but those boys are not so rough as they look. There is much more real courtesy in our country boors than you will find in a London *gamin*.'

'I can believe all good of your people,' said Lionel. 'I certainly never enjoyed church-going until now, when I make part of a country congregation.'

Ambrose, who was burning with indignation against the usurper of his rightful place by Martha's side, could not restrain the inclination to retort.

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'That is a pastoral sentiment, but not a very logical one. It has always been a mystery to me with what object the British rustic goes to church. It certainly is not to pray, equally certain that it is not to listen to the sermon; and when, as here, it is the custom for the men to cover their broadcloth with a white frock, and for the women to wear their grandmothers' black satin bonnets, it cannot be from motives of personal vanity.'

'That is very unfair, Uncle Ambrose,' said Helen. 'I do not say much for the choir lads; but as a rule it is our best people, old and young, who come to church, and it must be because it is right, and because it does them good.'

'That may be, Helen; but my position is that they do not come with such aspirations as to raise the idea of worship, or to influence our own devotion; and as to listening to the sermon, the thought never crosses their minds.'

'I do not believe they listen, but still the sermon does them as much good as if they did.'

'Save me from my friends!' exclaimed Mr. Erle.

'Well, papa, you know what I mean.'

'I know that you do quite right to stand by

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our own people, whom Ambrose is running down most unfairly.'

'I was defending those whom Mr. Benson was depreciating with at least equal unfairness. I prefer making one of an educated congregation, and I am sure I should prefer preaching to them.'

'It is a choice between those who like sermons without understanding them, and those who understand without liking them,' said Martha.

'That is the severest saying of all,' said Mr. Erle.

'You will not deny its truth, however, though *I* like your sermons; and as for old Jen, they are the great dissipation of her week. She was miserable at not being able to come to church this morning.'

'Is Mrs Jenkins unwell?' Lionel asked.

'Not very well. I think it must be an unwholesome day; for I feel tired, and shall be glad to go in and sit down.'

Accordingly Martha and most of the party turned into the house; and since Mr. Benson was not invited to follow, he might have taken leave, but he still lingered, detaining Helen.

'Since Miss Brown is not well,' he said, 'it

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accounts for her being so silent and out of spirits.'

'I do not think there is much the matter,' said Helen.

'She was more gracious, though only negatively gracious, to me to-day; and silence is better than strife. Was she grateful to you for the shortness of my stay at Dulcote?'

'There was no need for gratitude in the matter.'

'It was a trifle, certainly; but you know I should have stayed out my visit if you had not told me to go. And you do *not* know the greatness of the sacrifice.'

'Good-bye, Mr. Benson,' said Helen, abruptly. 'I must go in now.'

Perhaps, though flight was ignominious, it was the wisest course under the circumstances; and Lionel, finding himself deserted, had nothing to do but to leave the garden. Helen was angry with the impertinence of those foolish speeches, and yet more angry with herself for being so fluttered by them. She was beginning really to *like* Lionel Benson. He was pleasant and good-natured, and Martha was unjustly prejudiced against him; but she did not wish to regard him in any other light

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than that of an agreeable acquaintance; and Lionel's admiration, now displayed so openly, embarrassed and disconcerted her. She was sufficiently doubtful of her own feelings to make her unwilling to have them canvassed by others; and she was particularly anxious to avoid another warning from Martha as to the necessity of discouraging so dangerous an intimacy, so she acted on her own discretion, and pleaded a headache as an excuse for not taking her class at the school in the afternoon. Mr. Benson, more punctual in his attendance, did not find his vocation as teacher so charming as on the first occasion.

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CHAPTER XIX.

'THINGS all happen at once,' said Mrs. Erle to her husband, a day or two afterwards; 'and while Ambrose is so oppressively happy, it is difficult to think of anything but his love affairs; but I wanted to talk to you about Helen.'

'Or rather about Mr. Benson,' said Mr. Erle.

'Yes; he certainly is very much bent on coming to the house. He went to town on Monday, but not to-day; he came this morning on the pretext of carrying off Pippin for a drive in his dog-cart. Now I do not believe he really cares for children.'

'Only for their elder sisters?'

'Now you must be serious, dear. You yourself told me that you thought he admired Helen.'

'I do not think; I am quite sure of it.'

'Then what are we to do?'

'What other parents have done before—wait, and see what comes of it.'

'That is so very unsatisfactory,' said Mrs.

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Erle, with some indignation. 'Do you not care whether he marries your daughter or not?

'I care very much. I have made up my mind that I do not want him for a son-in-law.'

Mrs. Erle was a little disappointed. 'I do not see why,' she said. 'I like what I have seen of him, and it would be so pleasant to have her settled here beside us. However, of course, if you do not like it, we must try and prevent it.'

'What is the use of trying to prevent it? We cannot forbid him to make love to Helen, unless he does so more plainly than he does at present; and there is no use making her conscious and uncomfortable by a warning which will not have the smallest effect, if she is really disposed to like him.'

'I might give her a hint,' said Mrs. Erle.

'A hint is only the most unpleasant way of conveying an unpleasant truth. After all, I never supposed that I should be allowed to choose my own son-in-law, and perhaps I might not have done better, though I should have looked for one who was plainer and less plausible.'

Mrs. Erle was agitated by the confident tone in which her husband spoke of the new relationship.

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'You seem quite sure that Helen will have him,' she said.

'More sure than I am that he will ask her. Helen has been looking particularly pretty for the last day or two, and love is always embellishing. See how it has improved Miss Brown.'

'That is not a very strong argument; for we know now that Miss Brown was in love before we ever saw her, and Helen only looks better than usual because she takes more pains about her dress.'

'And why does she take more pains about her dress?'

The question was unanswerable; and having obtained a triumph, Mr. Erle used it generously.

'Do not think me an unfeeling parent, Amy. I am quite sure that we shall only make mischief by interfering, for Helen has good sense and good manners, and does not put herself forward. We do not ask the young man to the house, and cannot prevent his coming. After all, we know no harm of him, and can see none in his admiration for our Helen; but I am afraid Miss Brown must have some grounds for her strong dislike.'

'Women always dislike the man they have refused to marry.'

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'That is true,' said Mr. Erle, 'and resent his desire to marry any one else, which I think rather ungenerous. If that is the worst she has to say against Lionel Benson, there is no reason to forbid the banns.'

'In short, you see no harm in waiting to see how things turn out.'

'I not only see no harm, but no possibility of acting otherwise. You can scarcely expect me to ask Mr. Benson his intentions, considering our very short acquaintance.'

Mrs. Erle still clung to her wish for a little quiet diplomacy.

'It is the shortness of the acquaintance which makes me anxious to warn Helen, and try to ascertain her inclinations.'

'In which case you will foster a spark which would with a little wholesome neglect soon die out. I live in hopes that the dry-rot which Miss Brown wished to discover at Ilex Lodge, may break out in good earnest and drive him out of the place. Or perhaps Richard Wentworth will ask him to share the moor he has taken in Scotland.'

'He has gone to fetch Mr. Wentworth this afternoon, and they were to drive round by Elwood—so he told Helen.'

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'Well, then Helen will not encounter him to-day, for I met her in the opposite direction, as I came back from Hedworth.'

'Did you see Ambrose?'

'Not I. He had borrowed a horse and went off to Repton early this morning, I suppose in search of a *gage d'amour*. But one or two of the sick whom I had occasion to see were not well pleased with his early start, and complain that he is less attentive than he used to be.'

'He is sure to be unsettled now,' said Mrs. Erle. 'No one could say that idleness was his fault in old times; but his mind is running on Martha from morning to night. I wish that she would insist on their marrying at once.'

'That is scarcely the woman's part.'

Mrs. Erle replied that she would have to guide him sooner or later, and might as well undertake the charge before instead of after marriage. At this moment Pippin entered, with a radiant face, to relate his adventures. He had had a charming drive, and had come back from the station all alone on the back seat; but the honour and glory of this achievement was a little tarnished by the

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admission that Mr. Benson *would* strap him to the rail, instead of letting him hold on.

'Which was very wise of him,' said Mrs. Erle, feeling that such a proof of thoughtfulness almost entitled him to become her son-in-law.

'And did you see Miss Brown?' inquired Mr. Erle.

'Oh yes, papa; we got out and went into the house, and Miss Brown took me into the housekeeper's room to get some cake, and to see the parrot.'

'And what became of the two gentlemen?'

'Oh, they stayed with Mrs. Jenkins, who wanted to go instead, but Miss Brown said no.'

'Who is to do politeness for the firm when Mrs. Jenkins is no more?' said Mr. Erle, laughing; and of course Pippin pricked up his ears.

'Is Mrs. Jenkins going away, papa?'

Helen and her sisters now completed the family party, and were anxious to hear of all that Pippin had seen and done. Helen looked rather annoyed when she heard how Martha had eluded her visitors, and said—

'It is rather a pity that she will not be even civil; don't you think so, mamma?'

'Certainly,' said Mrs. Erle.

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'It was kind to go and get me the cake,' observed Pippin.

Mary, next in age, was continually on the watch to correct his mistakes, and make things level to his capacity, a rather exasperating process to the young brother.

'You know, Pippin, she might have rung the bell.'

'I know she might; but that would not have been so kind.'

'Very true,' said Mr. Erle, 'supposing you were the first person to be considered; but there were Mr. Wentworth and Mr. Benson.'

'They could talk to Mrs. Jenkins. But I think,' Pippin added, candidly, 'they did not much like it. Mr. Benson said something as we drove off; I forget what, exactly.'

Next came Ambrose. His horse was tired, and the parsonage nearly two miles out of the way, but his impatience would not suffer him to wait until to-morrow. So the children were sent upstairs—Rose and Mary wondering on the way what secrets Uncle Ambrose had to tell—in order that he might show a gold signet ring, engraved with an anchor, and then sit down to write the letter which was to accompany it.

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'You will be able to send Elias over with it this evening,' he said, the rapid movement of his pen arrested for a moment.

'Not this evening, conveniently,' said Mrs. Erle. 'I can send early to-morrow.'

Ambrose looked dissatisfied. 'I wish I had gone round by the Manor—I almost did so—for it seems that no one but myself has a right to place the ring on her finger.'

'And if you had gone in,' said Mr. Erle, drily, 'there would have been the additional advantage of securing Richard Wentworth and Lionel Benson as witnesses to the act. However, if a personal interview is necessary, why not wait till next Sunday?'

With a gesture of impatience, Ambrose took up his pen, but presently paused again.

'You are *quite* sure that you cannot send it this evening, Amy? I might leave my horse here, and take it up to the Lodge myself, only there are two wretched old women whom I must see as soon as I go home.'

'Imagine the alarm of your patients if they heard the designation,' said Mr. Erle. And Ambrose once more congratulated himself on 'keeping his temper beautifully,' as he wrote on without reply.

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'I have had so little walking to-day that I could go after tea,' said Helen, unwilling that her uncle should be disappointed.

'I really do not see the necessity,' said Mr. Erle. 'Ambrose may do his love the justice to believe that she will not be seized with a fit of childish impatience because her ring is twelve hours longer on its way.'

'Remember, William,' said his wife, 'that you and I were in love once, when such trifles seemed of importance.'

'I hope we are in love still, my dear; but it seems to me an insufficient excuse for magnifying grievances.'

'I do not mean to say any more about it,' said Ambrose; and the assertion was only a prelude to a full vindication. 'But you cannot wonder that I am a little annoyed. I told Martha that I should have her ring on Tuesday at latest, and though I could not well spare the time, I have spent the day in Repton in order that I might keep my word. And now you make it impossible.'

'I am really sorry, Ambrose,' said Mrs. Erle, more tolerant of his grievances than her husband was disposed to be. 'But we always let Elias go home early on Tuesdays to work

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in his allotment, and it would not be fair to send him off in the other direction.'

'Then there is no use saying any more,' rejoined Ambrose. 'I must just tell Martha that it is not my fault, and make an end.' And he presently took leave, in an injured frame of mind.

'Really,' Mr. Erle observed, 'if this sort of thing is to go on, and Ambrose is to throw us into a fever every time he comes, he had better either stay away or marry to-morrow.'

'Now *I* think,' said Helen, coming up to her father and kissing him, 'that you are very ill-natured to poor Uncle Ambrose. I know, from what mamma said just now, that you were just as foolish once.'

'Under no conceivable circumstances could I make such a fool of myself,' replied Mr. Erle; 'and Ambrose has the less excuse, since Martha is so quiet and sensible.'

'Then you must at least give him credit for having chosen so wisely. I know that in your heart, papa, you are as much pleased with this marriage as any of us.'

'No one will be better pleased, if it ever takes place,' said Mr. Erle. And with this admission the conversation dropped.

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CHAPTER XX.

ONE month, the stipulated interval between his visits to Elwood Manor, had elapsed, and Ambrose was on his way thither. On the former occasion he had come to the house with conflicting feelings of hope and fear; he had retraced his steps with joyful exultation. His mood was different now—sober, if not gloomy; and instead of approaching the house with any alacrity, he seemed to linger as he drew nearer. He was shown into the library, where Martha sat alone.

'At last!' she said, with a shade of reproach, which only gave tenderness to her welcome.

'Am I so late?' he asked.

'No, not late; only it has seemed a long morning. You look tired, Ambrose.'

'Not bodily tired, but weary and dissatisfied.'

'With me?' Martha asked.

'With you, partly; partly with myself. I can do nothing as I ought. My duties sicken me: and so far from gaining practice, I have lost it in this last month, from which I hoped

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so much. And I do not, I cannot feel that I wrong you in saying that the fault rests with you.'

'I am sorry,' said Martha, while tears slowly gathered in her eyes.

'With you,' Ambrose repeated; 'for while I live only for you, and for the hope of making you wholly mine, you are leading an idle, pleasure-seeking life, denying yourself to none—to none but me. Your letters have been short and cold; and in those few times that I have been allowed to see you, you have checked every sign of affection with the chilling word of prudence. You have even refused to wear the ring of betrothal.'

'Here, Ambrose,' said Martha, placing her left hand in his. 'It was on my finger when I heard your step. At all other times it is next my heart. But I cannot wear in public the seal of an engagement which you forbid me to declare.'

Softened for a moment, Ambrose raised the trembling hand to his lips; but his wrath was not yet appeased.

'Five, six times we have met since you gave yourself to me, but how often in this month have you seen Richard Wentworth?'

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Martha's spirit was roused by the question; she withdrew her hand, and her eyes sparkled with anger.

'Really,' she said, 'I have neither counted, nor desired to count.'

'He has been here twice or thrice,' continued Ambrose. 'You have met him at the parsonage, and at dinner at Ricksworth; you will again meet him at Stretton next week. Your names are already coupled together.'

'By Lionel Benson,' said Martha.

'Not by him only. It is becoming the gossip of the neighbourhood. His intentions are evident enough, and yours are only dubious.'

'And am I to blame,' rejoined Martha, in a tone of deep resentment, 'if I am persecuted by distasteful attentions, which a word from you will put to flight? Declare our engagement, and Lionel Benson himself will find it hard to infuse jealousy and suspicion between us.'

Angry and unreasonable as Ambrose was at the moment, the words came home to him.

'Forgive me, dearest, if I have wronged you; but it is maddening to be shut out from your dear presence, and to think of those who aspire

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to win your favour, and who can see you when they will.'

'What would you have me do?' said Martha.

'Give up society for a little while. Is it so great a sacrifice?'

'It is no sacrifice. But, after all, to what does my dissipation amount? I have dined out twice in the last month, and have accepted a third invitation, and I have seen such people as called when I chanced to be at home.'

'I have seen no one, and cared to see no one but you.'

'I have not asked, and I do not wish for such seclusion on your side,' replied Martha; 'and on my own, I only wish to avoid the appearance of singularity.'

'In short, you think me exacting and unreasonable.'

'Yes,' said Martha, sadly, not angrily, 'I do.'

Silence ensued. On neither side was there any inclination to give way, but Martha spoke first.

'Dear Ambrose!' she said, 'there can be no true love without faith and patience, and I do not think these are wanting on my side. I could bear all the evils of a secret engagement,

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but distrust I cannot bear. I cannot satisfy you with many words, yet I know that I love you with all the strength of my heart; and if this assurance is not enough, you must release me from my promise.'

'You give me up?' said Ambrose, despairingly.

'*I* have not changed,' replied Martha.

'My love has not changed, but it changes me, making me more than ever the slave of passion. Bear with me a little longer, Martha —it is you who are one day to make me steadfast and self-restrained, like yourself.'

'And cold,' said Martha, with a faint smile.

'You are not cold:—it was cruel injustice to say so. But, Martha, you are not so soon weary of our engagement—you will wait a little longer, and bear its discomforts?'

'I can bear anything but distrust,' Martha repeated; and so the wound was healed for that time, but the scar remained. She tried to talk on indifferent matters, but not with the ease of one who expects confidence and sympathy, for she knew how easy it was to give offence.

'Have you settled which is the best site for the schools? Mr. Trelawney said that he had

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not heard from you; and if we are to break ground this year, something must be decided.'

'I decided in favour of Tinker's End,' replied Ambrose; 'but old Blewitt, the ironmonger, has some notion that it will interfere with rights of common, and is ready to get up a petition signed by all the donkeys in the place, brute and human. He is so long-winded and tiresome that I cannot listen to him, and I think you must go over yourself to settle the matter.'

'I should not like to do that,' said Martha.

'You cannot even set foot in Hedworth on a matter of business, because I am in the place!'

'There is no necessity for doing so,' replied Martha, steadily; 'I entrusted the business to you, and shall be entirely satisfied with your management of it.'

'I have no heart to set about schools, or anything else, when you take no interest in it.'

'We are not to quarrel again—twice in a short half hour,' said Martha. 'If you knew how I long and strive to please you, you could not blame me so freely.'

'I tell you what it is,' said Ambrose, getting

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up and walking about the room in great agitation, 'I am so miserably dissatisfied with myself, and with the change which this great joy has wrought in me, that I know not what to do or say. I look back as if to another life, to a day, not so long since, when my aspirations were high and my purpose single, if I did not always act up to them. Now I am desultory, idle, self-seeking, and my temper is as uncertain as my spirits. Until I succeed in my profession—and now I feel that nothing but failure is before me—I dare not betray the engagement of which you are already weary. So you must give me up, Martha, and let me go my own way.'

Perhaps it had been better for Martha to take him at his word, but such a thought was far from her. She repeated her assurances of constancy, refused to listen to his self-upbraidings, and once more riveted the link which had so nearly snapped asunder. When at last they parted, Ambrose went home, remorseful for the past and hopeful for the future; but the tears which Martha had so hardly restrained broke forth abundantly.

Another meeting took place that afternoon. It was possible that Lionel Benson had watched

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Mrs. Erle go out into the parish; certain that he saw Helen at work alone in the garden, and he opened the wicket and went in.

'You should not undertake such a toilsome task as tying up carnations on a hot afternoon,' he said.

'I never feel the heat much, and now I am quite in the shade,' replied Helen.

'Then if I may not work for you, at least let me work with you.'

'I have not more to do than I can easily get done before tea.'

Lionel, however, turned up his wristbands and set about the task in as workmanlike a manner as could be expected of a person so little familiar with country occupations. He very soon confessed his fatigue.

'Stooping is very disagreeable. Why do you not get your younger sisters to do it?—they would not have to stoop so much.'

'I am not so very tall,' said Helen.

'No one could call you short, however. I do not like tall women; people like Miss Brown, who give one an oppressive sense of height as they come into a room. And, by the way, Miss Erle, will you not commend the state of things between Miss Brown and me? It is

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only an armed neutrality, indeed; but that is better than open warfare.'

'I do not see much difference,' said Helen, gravely.

'Perhaps there is no stronger mutual liking, only greater politeness. Miss Brown's manner is softer than it used to be, and I sometimes fancy that love is the cause, and that she is disposed to favour Mr. Wentworth's suit. I hinted my suspicions to your uncle the other day, and he looked more than incredulous, even indignant.'

Helen rejoiced in the shade of her garden hat, and only stooped lower over her work.

'I have a kindness for Wentworth, and heartily wish him success,' continued Lionel.

'Considering your opinion of Miss Brown, it is an odd way of showing your kindness,' said Helen, quickly.

'Oh, there are compensations which he will not despise; and, besides, Wentworth is quite capable of holding his own. He would be a good-tempered, but not too indulgent a husband.'

Angry herself, Helen could imagine how her uncle must have chafed at hearing such words; she wondered if he had not betrayed himself,

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and longed to ask for particulars, but Mr. Benson glided away from the subject.

'Are you to dine at Stretton next week?' he said.

'Yes; Miss Brown is to take me.'

'Wentworth is to be there, and my invitation is still unanswered. Will you be very angry if I accept it?'

'I have given you no right to ask such questions,' said Helen. 'At Dulcote, perhaps too thoughtlessly, I told you what seemed kind towards Miss Brown, and now you can judge for yourself.'

'If *you* wish me to stay away, it will be no pleasure to me to go,' said Lionel, earnestly.

Helen left her occupation and turned to Mr. Benson with a glowing face, but her words were measured and quiet. 'Will you let me say, once for all, that I am not used to this sort of talk, and it makes me uncomfortable.'

However taken by surprise, an ardent lover would not have missed the opportunity of declaring his intentions with an openness which might entitle him to say what he pleased. Lionel acted otherwise; he looked mortified, even penitent, and without a word placed her basket and scissors in her hand, and allowed

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her to carry them into the house. Helen took off her hat, and going up to the drawing-room mirror, surveyed her flushed cheeks with considerable dissatisfaction.

'How stupid and provoking of me to blush so much!' she thought; 'it made my words mean more than I intended. Yet I certainly *ought* to stop him, for I know neither what he means, nor what I wish. I am quite resolved either to hate him as much as Martha does, or not to think about him at all.' An excellent resolution, which she did not begin to put into practice that afternoon.

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CHAPTER XXI.

HOWEVER dispirited and unfit for society Martha might feel, she did not alter her intention of dining with Colonel and Mrs. Tillotson, at Stretton, and she called for Helen at the appointed day and hour. Her visits to the parsonage had of late been less frequent, and since she and Helen both felt that they had something to conceal, they looked forward with little pleasure to the long *tête-à-tête* drive. At first they talked of indifferent matters, but Martha soon asked if Ambrose had been at the parsonage.

'For a few minutes. He was very good, and did not even propose to wait until you called for me,' said Helen.

Martha sighed heavily, and felt less sensible to such a proof of virtue. Her letter from Ambrose that morning had again reproached her with worldliness and love of dissipation, and the cruel and unjust words might have been blotted out by one kind glance from his eyes.

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'Is Ambrose much out of spirits when he is with you?' she asked.

'His spirits were always variable,' said Helen; 'and now they are less boyish. Mamma used to say that he was the youngest man of his age she ever knew, but of course this great event has sobered him.'

'Or saddened him,' said Martha.

Helen looked up uneasily. For some days she had feared that the understanding between Martha and her uncle was imperfect, and now the admission was made by Martha herself. 'I am sure that Uncle Ambrose is happy at heart,' she said.

'We will not talk of it, Helen. He would be justly angry if he thought that I was repining or wished him other than he is, and one day, perhaps, will make all clear. And this time I do not wrong Lionel Benson in holding him mainly responsible for the cloud which has come between us.'

Helen cast down her eyes, and began in nervous agitation to pluck the petals off a bouquet of hot-house flowers which Martha had just given her. Martha looked at her keenly.

'You are sensitive to any reflection on Mr. Benson, Helen.'

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'I do not defend him,' said Helen, in a low voice.

'But you do not like him to be attacked.'

'No, it pains me a little; do not be angry with me, Martha.' And as Helen's tearful, pleading eyes met those of her friend, it was plain enough that all former warnings had been useless, and that now they would be spoken in vain. There was no anger in Martha's silent caress, but her disapproval was not less acutely felt by Helen.

Colonel and Mrs. Tillotson were a childless couple, who had been for many years in the East Indies, and now lived for the most part in retirement, but at regular intervals entertained their country neighbours with great state and magnificence. Their dinner parties were called solemn, by young men especially, and often served for one of those convenient standing grievances which so much enhance the enjoyment of social life; but no one thought of declining an invitation to Stretton; and on this occasion Mr. Richard Wentworth had relinquished the attractions of a fish dinner at Greenwich with his own set of particular friends, although neither the company nor the cooking at Colonel Tillotson's table were very

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congenial to his tastes. He was in the room when Martha and Helen arrived, and Mrs. Tillotson, a nervous little woman, in a cap of marvellous construction, was satisfied that she had done a kind thing to both of them, in commending Miss Brown to his attention, to whom she herself could never find anything to say.

The more prosaic mother might again have said that Helen only looked better than usual because she was well and becomingly dressed, but Mr. Erle would have felt justified in the assertion that love was embellishing, had he been there to see her changing colour, and the fawn-like, startled beauty of her eyes, every time the door opened to admit a fresh guest. Her first feeling had been one of relief at not seeing Lionel, but now there was a pang of disappointment because he did not come. Her suspense was presently set at rest by Mr. Wentworth. 'Benson is late,' he observed; 'did you pass him on the road, Miss Brown?'

'No,' Martha said; 'I did not know he was to be here.'

'That is only because you are a new comer. The second or third time you dine here you will know exactly whom to expect, for these

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dinner parties are all mapped out in districts, and our district extends from Dulcote on the north to Elwood on the south, including, of course, Ilex Lodge.'

'Hush!' said Martha; 'Colonel Tillotson will hear you.'

'If he does, his orderly mind will be gratified by the public explanation. Here comes Benson.'

Lionel very soon made his way to the sofa on which Martha and Helen were seated, but his greeting to both ladies was slight, and, as Helen thought, distant. She understood the resolution not to distinguish her by any special attention; and with the strange perversity of woman's heart, she began to crave for that which she had deprecated. The two gentlemen stood talking together until dinner was announced, and then Mr. Wentworth took Martha in, while Helen was consigned to Mr. Benson.

'For this,' said Lionel, in a low voice, 'you must not blame me. I cannot *refuse* to take you in.'

Helen did not attempt to reply, and a childish longing for the protection of her mother's side laid hold of her mind. She was

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silent and ill at ease; and after one or two commonplace topics, Lionel let her alone, and engaged in conversation with his other neighbour. Martha, with probably at least equal disinclination to talk, performed her part at the dinner-table better. Mr. Wentworth, too well bred to annoy her by obtrusive attentions, was an easy, pleasant talker, and understood how to draw out her rather decided views on subjects of general interest. And on his side there was an increasing disposition to regard his proposed marriage, not merely, as at first, with resignation, but with an anxiety which made him really desirous to please. 'You know,' as he said, not to Lionel Benson, but among his more intimate friends, 'if one can not only marry a rich wife, but like her, it puts the whole thing on a much more respectable footing.'

Martha made one or two unsuccessful attempts to draw Helen into the conversation, and then resigned herself as well as she could to the inference which Mr. Benson might draw, and encourage others to draw, from the long and uninterrupted talk. And, in fact, when Lionel again addressed Helen, towards the end of dinner, it was on this very subject—

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'We are more silent than our neighbours, Miss Erle.'

Helen, having taken herself to task for her folly and nervousness, answered in quite her natural manner—

'Yes; it is a talkative party.'

'I was not speaking generally, but of our nearest neighbours. Do you not think that even Mr. Arnold would be convinced that I did not speak at random the other day, if he were here now? You can see Mr. Wentworth's profile without turning round, and note its happy and animated expression.'

'Yes, I see,' said Helen: 'but it does not in the least alter my opinion.'

'Perhaps Mr. Arnold would be less tenacious.'

'I *am sure* he would not.'

'Oh, if you speak so positively, it must be from sources of information to which I have no access. Have I your authority for contradicting the general report?'

'Certainly not,' said Helen, with a good deal of spirit. 'But you know my wishes that you should not be the means of spreading it.'

'Your wishes must always be a law to me. But you have certainly awakened my curiosity;

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and considering our connexion with Miss Brown, I have some reason to be curious.'

'And some reason to expect that your father will receive early information of an event to which you are so fond of alluding.'

'Early information, but it seems not the earliest. That is reserved for you—and Mr. Arnold.'

Even Lionel's daring seemed to waver about letting this last shaft fly, and he dropped his voice so much that Helen felt doubtful if she had heard the two last words aright. His eager, listening face confirmed her fears that she had incautiously betrayed the truth, and as a last resource she appealed to his honour.

'I scarcely understand you, Mr. Benson; but no generous man will take advantage of what I have said.'

'You may trust me,' said Lionel; 'but it must be no half confidence. In the course of the evening, I shall find, or make, an opportunity to speak to you apart, and then we will talk out this matter.'

By her silence Helen accepted the proposal, and no more words passed between them. In returning to the drawing-room she hoped for some respite to collect her thoughts and resolve

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upon a plan of action, but an elderly maiden lady, sister to Colonel Tillotson, was hospitably bent on entertaining her, and did not give her a moment for connected thought. First she led her to a cabinet of curiosities, and then they sat down to a marble-topped table, on which was displayed a book of Indian sports. Now, Helen hoped that she might be left to turn over the pages alone, but Miss Tillotson was much too fond of relating 'my brother's exploits in pig-sticking,' to release her so easily. Although a great, she was not an incessant talker, and liked an intelligent reply at proper intervals; and Helen really did listen as well as she could, and gave up the attempt to think of the dreaded interview, faintly hoping that her words might be more to the purpose if not pondered beforehand.

No position could have been better devised for an uninterrupted colloquy, for the table stood in the recess of a large bay window, partly screened by its heavy crimson hangings; and when the gentlemen came in, Lionel did not miss his opportunity.

'Have you got my old friend, the Book of Indian Sports?' he said. 'I knew all the prints by heart when I was a child, and shall be

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delighted to renew my acquaintance with them.'

'Then take my place, and Miss Erle will show them to you,' said Miss Tillotson; and then she glided away to be civil to another forlorn young lady.

Lionel did not sit down, but stood, either from compassion or policy, where he might best screen Helen from the view of the other persons in the room.

'It is best to come to the point at once,' he said, 'and make our interview as short as it must needs be painful. Your uncle is engaged to Miss Brown.'

Helen made no attempt to deny it.

'An engagement known to his family, but not generally declared. I do not pain you by demanding a verbal assent, for I see how you suffer under a deceit which must have been most repugnant to your open, candid nature. But I must blame those who have inflicted such an injury, not on my father only, but on my friend.' And here, by a slight movement, Lionel indicated Mr. Wentworth.

Carried away by his tone of virtuous indignation, Helen thought much more of the wrong done to the slighted suitor and the elder Mr.

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Benson than of the troubles in store for Martha and her uncle.

'We all thought it a pity not to declare the engagement,' she said; 'and I believe Uncle Ambrose himself will see it now, and be anxious not to delay the marriage.'

A peculiar expression flitted across Lionel's face.

'You speak as if there were no obstacles in the way.'

'Nor are there. Martha has told us that she is free to act; and so far,' Helen added, 'she had a perfect right to declare her engagement when and in whatever way she pleased.'

Lionel resumed the tone of high morality which had before been so effective.

'I am pained to hear *you* say so, Miss Erle. I will not speak of Mr. Arnold, for fear of speaking too strongly, and yet perhaps the conduct of his nearest relations will be more blamed by those who hear the outline of the story. Advantage has been taken of Miss Brown's intimacy at the parsonage to procure the appointment at Hedworth—every facility was afforded to Mr. Arnold to secure her affections, and your father has finally sanctioned a clandestine engagement. I know him too

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well to doubt the purity of his motives, but it will bear an ugly appearance in the eyes of the world.'

'No one regretted the secrecy more than papa,' said Helen.

'And no one could have prevented it more easily. But it is not merely or chiefly to the suppression of the truth that I object. Surely the engagement ought never to have been formed; surely you must see that the marriage of Miss Brown to a young man without position, or means, who has wholly failed in his profession, is utterly unsuitable.'

If Helen had been quick in retort she might have replied that Miss Brown might as properly marry a young surgeon as a young solicitor; but of late that episode in Lionel's career had faded from her memory, and she only said—

'Of that Miss Brown is the best judge.'

'Supposing her judgment not to have been unfairly biassed,' said Lionel.

Helen was at once grieved and angry.

'If you make such insinuations, Mr. Benson, it should be to those who are better able to refute them. I shall tell Miss Brown on our way home that you have forced the truth from me, and she will settle what to do next.'

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'Again and again I repeat, that I do not blame *you*,' said Lionel, urgently; 'I am most unwilling to blame your father. He ought first to be informed that I know all; tell him to-morrow—to-night, if you will—but leave Miss Brown in peace. Thinking of me as she does, you will only alarm and agitate her most unnecessarily.'

Helen acquiesced in the truth of this assertion; and partly from cowardice, partly from honest conviction, she agreed to follow Lionel's advice, and to say nothing to Martha.

'And now,' he added, 'I will torment you no more. Tell your father that I will see him to-morrow, as early as I can; and I hope that *our* next meeting will be a pleasanter one.'

So Helen left the Indian Sports to sit by Martha, where she remained unmolested until their carriage was announced.

'You had a very long talk with Mr. Benson,' Martha observed, when they had driven off.

'Yes; I do not think it was my fault, but I cannot tell you about it to-night,' said Helen. Her voice was unsteady; and in truth, now that she was veiled by the darkness, tears of weariness and vexation were stealing down her

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face. Martha gently stroked her hand, and asked no more.

Mr. and Mrs. Erle had both gone to bed before they reached the parsonage, and Helen rejoiced in the reprieve. She went to bed, and instead of lying awake all night like an orthodox heroine, wetting her pillow with tears, she fell asleep at once, and slept profoundly.

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CHAPTER XXII.

LIONEL BENSON had promised to be with Mr. Erle early, but he had no intention of making that his first visit. Soon after seven next morning he was in his dog-cart, rightly judging that it would take him nearly an hour to reach Hedworth by the rough moorland track. When he arrived there, and asked for Mr. Arnold, Dennis said that he had come down, but had not yet breakfasted, having been called into the surgery to see a patient. Lionel said that he would wait; and he was accordingly shown into the room, where breakfast was spread on one table, while on the other there was an open portfolio and a closely-written sheet, on which Ambrose must have been engaged when he was called away. Lionel was, or thought himself, a gentleman, and made no attempt to read the contents of the sheet; but from the rapid yet compressed writing, with some words underscored, it was not hard for his lawyer's instinct to divine that *there* was a love-letter.

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Ambrose now entered hastily and in evident uneasiness.

'There is nothing wrong at Elwood, I hope?'

'No; so far as I know, the inmates both of the manor and the parsonage are perfectly well.'

'Your early visit was rather startling,' continued Ambrose. 'Have you breakfasted?'

'No; but I shall not long detain you from yours, since a very few minutes will suffice to explain my business. The fact is, Mr. Arnold, that I do not come so much as my father's representative—though I *might* act in that capacity—as from friendship to Richard Wentworth, and out of a sincere regard to Miss Brown's good name.'

'What of Richard Wentworth?' said Ambrose, feeling it more easy to curb his fierce indignation if he forbore to breathe Martha's name.

'Some unpleasant rumours have reached my ears,' continued Lionel, 'of an entanglement between yourself and Miss Brown. I do not really credit the report, but I should be glad to have your authority for denying it.'

'Answer my question first,' replied Ambrose,

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with rising anger; 'why is Wentworth's name brought into the affair?'

'For a reason I have before hinted to you. Wentworth's intentions are well known—in fact, he has declared them to myself; and Miss Brown's inclinations do not appear dubious. If you do not choose to take my word for it, ask any of the other guests who saw them at dinner together last night; ask his own brother, Sir Henry, whether Wentworth's suit meets with any discouragement. And I would not willingly think so ill of Miss Brown as to believe that she openly encourages the addresses of one man while secretly engaged to another.'

'You are at liberty to deny the engagement.'

'And to say that it never existed?'

'To say that it exists no longer, which will, I imagine, be equally satisfactory to Richard Wentworth and all other suitors.'

While Ambrose spoke this with the slow and deliberate articulation of suppressed passion, he took up his freshly-written letter and tore it across; and then, seizing another sheet, he wrote the following words:—

'I am called upon to deny or declare our engagement. I deny, or rather renounce it, and leave you free. In the consciousness of

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your love, I was prepared to face the scorn of men and the reproaches of my own conscience, but now I know myself deceived, and it only remains to forget the brief delusion. This day I leave Hedworth, to return no more.'

'Read it if you will!' he said, holding out the sheet to Lionel, who, while disclaiming any wish to do so, saw enough in one rapid glance to satisfy himself that his work was done. Slowly, like one who exults in self-torture, Ambrose folded and sealed the note, and directed it in clear and legible characters to Miss Brown.

'Will you be my messenger?' he resumed.

'If you please; I can easily drive round that way.'

'Tell her when you see her'—— Ambrose began in a slightly softened tone, which Lionel hastily interrupted.

'I shall not see her; in fact, I wish to spare her the pain of supposing the story is known. I may feel it my duty to tell Wentworth, but I am sure he will be as anxious as myself to keep it quiet.'

'Very probably,' said Ambrose, with great bitterness.

'You have acted nobly in doing all in your

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power to retrieve the mistake,' continued Lionel, not without embarrassment; for it had been more easy to adopt a tone of high-minded morality towards a young lady than with a man of his own age; and, in fact, Ambrose cut him short haughtily enough.

'You must excuse me, Mr. Benson, for saying that I require neither praise nor blame from any man. I think our business is done.'

It had been done very successfully, Lionel thought, as he drove off with the important document. This he sent up to the manor by a trusty messenger, while he himself repaired to the parsonage, feeling it expedient to get through his interview with Mr. Erle before Ambrose appeared to tell his own story.

Breakfast being over, Helen had followed her father into the study to relate the disclosure of the foregoing evening, and she was rather relieved by the view he took of it.

'I am glad the truth has come out,' he said. 'Of course, people will say hard things of me; I had made up my mind to that from the headstrong folly with which Ambrose has conducted the affair; but it is better that the mystery should be blown up within six weeks than six months. Ambrose will rave and make

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Martha's life miserable for a few days, after which we may hope he will take a common-sense view of the whole thing, and we shall begin to talk about settlements. So you need not fret about it; you did quite right to tell Benson the truth, though I must say it was unhandsome of him to exact it.'

'Here he comes,' said Helen—for the study window commanded the wicket. 'I shall go now and try to catch mamma alone. Mary was with her when I went to her room this morning, and I could not tell her how I had been so horribly bothered.'

Lionel felt that he had a more difficult part to play with Mr. Erle than with his brother-in-law; partly from an unwillingness to make an open breach between himself and Helen's father, partly because anything like management and diplomacy would be thrown away on a man who was at once free-spoken and clear-sighted. And, in truth, he felt himself baffled by Mr. Erle's opening words—

'You have come to talk to me of the affair between Ambrose and Miss Brown. I must say that you and your father have some right to feel yourselves ill-used in the matter, and if Ambrose had been my son instead of my brother-

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in-law, I should not have allowed it to go on. As it was, I could only protest, and not interfere, and since it has been a mystery of so few weeks, there is no great harm done.'

'Even less than you imagine, Mr. Erle. Your brother-in-law has, this morning, voluntarily broken off the engagement.'

'How do you know that?' asked Mr. Erle, sharply.

'From his own lips. What you have just said had already occurred to myself—that to him, and not to you, I ought first to appeal. And, in fact, no appeal was necessary; I simply requested him either to deny or to announce his engagement, and without a moment's hesitation he preferred the former course.'

'Without giving Miss Brown a voice in the matter?'

'Of course it was not for me to inquire particulars. But I believe he has written to her.'

'You must allow me to say, Mr. Benson,' rejoined Mr. Erle, with great warmth, 'that you have acted excessively ill. Every one knows that poor Ambrose, though as noble a fellow as ever breathed, is pliable as wax; and so you have moulded him to your purposes, inducing him to do a dishonourable act, of

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which he will repent to the last day of his life.'

'Most people,' replied Lionel, 'will agree with me that there was greater dishonour in contracting than in cancelling the engagement.'

'Such people as doubt the possibility of disinterested love. But I put Miss Brown's fortune out of the question, and should say exactly the same if she were as poor as himself.'

'If we *could* put Miss Brown's fortune out of the question, of course it would alter the case,' said Lionel, with a cool assumption of superiority, which might have chafed a man of more equable temperament than Mr. Erle. In his reply, he certainly forgot the courtesy which he might be expected to exercise under his own roof—

'You have said enough, Mr. Benson. I will wish you good morning, and lose no time in endeavouring to undo the mischief you have done.'

'I shall detain you very few minutes more. You naturally consider the matter chiefly as it affects your brother-in-law.'

'On the contrary,' interposed Mr. Erle, 'I am only thinking of Miss Brown. I say that Ambrose has used her scandalously in throwing

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her over at your instigation. I know that there was a strong attachment on both sides; and though some people might have thought that Ambrose, with his flightiness and enthusiasm, would make rather a fatiguing husband, for purity of life and singleness of purpose you will never find his equal; and Martha could see no fault in him. I shall insist on a meeting between them before I consider the engagement broken.'

'You will act as you think best.'

'Of course I shall,' said Mr. Erle, touchily.

'But,' continued Lionel, with great suavity, 'it is my own opinion that Miss Brown had already repented of her rash choice, and will be the last to urge Mr. Arnold to reconsider his determination.'

'Well, we shall see. Good morning, Mr. Benson.'

'Good morning.' And Lionel, finding that Mr. Erle refused to see his outstretched hand, left the study in a less triumphant mood than he had entered it; while Mr. Erle went upstairs to his wife and daughter.

'Well,' he said, 'I have just dismissed Benson, who tells me that it is all at an end between Ambrose and Martha. As I made

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him understand, he has behaved infamously, and Ambrose not much better.'

It would have been difficult for Helen to say whether Mr. Erle's opinion of Lionel's share in the affair, or the announcement itself, inflicted the keenest suffering, but a guilty, miserable feeling that she was herself responsible might have betrayed to her that Lionel was in fact her first thought. Mrs. Erle was, of course, distressed for Ambrose.

'My dear William, what can have induced Ambrose to do such a thing?'

'I have just told you that it was Lionel Benson. Why Ambrose listened to him is another matter, I stood by the fellow, and thought Miss Brown hard on him, but I shall never say a good word for him as long as I live.' Mr. Erle's enemies, if he had any, might have accused him of setting an indifferent example of Christian meekness to his parishioners had they heard his vehemence. He soon resumed, for Mrs. Erle and Helen were silent from dismay, 'And the worst is that my hands are tied by all this money. If Miss Brown had nothing, I could set it to rights, but Benson is lawyer enough to see and insist on that strong point in the case, and knows

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that I can take no decided step in patching the rent he has made. However, I must do what I can, so put on your bonnet, Helen, and come with me to Elwood. Miss Brown may prefer to see you rather than me, or to see us together; and if Ambrose comes here, your mother must keep him till we come back, or, which will perhaps be better, send him after us.'

'Must I go, papa?'

'Yes; do not be cowardly about it. It is as disagreeable a business for me as for you.'

Helen went to get ready, and Mrs. Erle reminded her husband of a fact he had forgotten in the heat of discussion. 'You must not be rough with her, poor child. Your unmeasured abuse of Mr. Benson touched her nearly.'

'I forgot all about it, Amy. It is just as well I did, however, and spoke plainly, for we all see him in his true colours now. Of course he must not have our Helen, and it is well the thing has not gone further.'

Mrs. Erle feared that it had already gone too far for Helen's peace of mind, but there was no leisure to discuss the question now, since Helen returned, equipped for the walk, and her father was anxious to be at home again before Ambrose made his appearance.

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Mr. Erle and Helen were admitted, and shown up to Miss Brown's private sitting-room. The perfect composure with which Martha greeted them inclined Helen to think that the blow had not yet fallen, but a glance at the writing-table assured her that she was mistaken. A small packet of letters, and the little morocco case containing the ring of betrothal lay there, and when they entered Martha had been engaged in putting them into a parcel.

'Will you have a talk with Helen first? I can go downstairs,' said Mr. Erle.

'No, thank you; all I have to say can be said to both of you. I intended to write a note, begging you to restore this parcel to Mr. Arnold, and to ask the same favour of him. At the same time, I should have consulted you as to the best means of providing another surgeon for Hedworth.'

Certainly there was not much to be said after this.

'Have you seen Ambrose?' Mr. Erle asked.

'No; he has written.'

'And you know, of course, who prompted the letter?'

'I can guess.'

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Helen felt as if the words were directed to her, and her tears broke forth. 'I know that it was my fault, Martha.'

'How should that be, Helen? I do not even blame Lionel Benson. The fault, or mistake, lay deeper, and between ourselves. If otherwise, the bond between us would not have been severed so easily.'

'I do not think it *is* severed until you have met and learned the truth from each other's lips,' said Mr. Erle.

For the first time, Martha changed colour. 'Is that Mr. Arnold's wish?'

'We have not seen him yet.'

'Possibly you will not see him; he writes that he is to leave Hedworth to-day. But in any case, since all is at an end between us, a meeting would only be a source of needless pain.'

'One word more,' said Mr. Erle; 'do not think we shall stand by Ambrose in this matter. I am glad that he has the good feeling to leave the country, and it will make it the more possible to continue a friendship which it would be painful to terminate in such a manner.'

'Very well,' said Martha, with a faint

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smile; 'only for a Sunday or two, not longer, I will give up my weekly visits to the parsonage.'

Mr. Erle rose to go, and Helen pressed closer and whispered—'Will it be any comfort to you if I stay a little while?'

'Not to-day, Helen; I shall be best alone.'

If Martha's tone was hard, it seemed to be only because she dared not trust herself to tenderness, for fear of breaking down.

'Although,' Mr. Erle observed, as they trudged wearily home under the scorching July sun, 'it would be much better for her to sit down and have a good cry, like other women.'

Late in the afternoon Ambrose came to the parsonage, just as Mr. Erle was setting out for Hedworth in search of him. He seemed as little desirous as Martha to waste many words on the breach between them.

'I have been packing such things as I wish to take with me,' he said; 'and am now on the way to the station. I do not want anything else sent after me, so you must have a sale.'

'Where are you going?' said Mrs. Erle. She and Helen were sitting at work in the shade of the verandah when Mr. Erle and Ambrose came across the lawn to join them.

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'To London to-night; where next is not quite certain.'

'Tell us where you *think* of going, then?' said Mr. Erle. 'You are not to set off in this melodramatic way, without leaving a direction.'

'Most likely to Liverpool. An old fellow-student at Guy's wrote the other day about some epidemic there which made a dearth of doctors, and I shall offer my services. I tell you this, since you insist on it, but I do not mean to write nor wish to hear from you.'

'Very well; when natural affection revives, you must let us know.'

Helen had stepped back into the drawing-room, and now returned with the packet entrusted to her by Martha. 'I was told to give you this, Uncle Ambrose.'

Ambrose took it with a trembling hand. 'Dennis was to send *her* letters back this evening. And I wished to tell you all three, that if the story does get about, I am the one to be blamed in the matter.'

'Of that we are quite aware,' said Mr. Erle.

'In the eyes of the world, I mean,' continued Ambrose; 'of course I know myself to be perfectly justified in what I have done.'

'Perhaps we had better not enter into the

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merits of the case,' said Mr. Erle. 'Since we are to part for an indefinite time, it is as well to part friends, and I might speak my mind more plainly than you like. As for Amy and Helen, they are so thoroughly worried that they can scarcely say a word, good or bad.'

'I am sadly disappointed, indeed,' said Mrs. Erle, the tears beginning to fall; 'and there is something dreadful in your going off in this vague way again. How are you to live?'

'Somehow, you need not be afraid,' said Ambrose, with a miserable attempt to speak gaily. On the whole, it seemed that the half-hour which he had allotted to this visit to the parsonage would be more profitably spent at the station in waiting for the up-train, so he hurried through his farewells and walked off.

'Well, he is gone,' said Mr. Erle; 'and I have wasted the whole day. I must go into the parish for an hour, and I hope to find you with brighter faces when I come back, good people.' He kissed his wife, stroked Helen's glossy hair, and turned away.

Mrs. Erle felt that this was the moment for saying those few words to Helen which had been all day upon her tongue.

'Your father thinks, my dear, that we

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ought, for Miss Brown's sake, to drop all acquaintance with Mr. Benson, or at least make it as cool and distant as possible.'

'Yes, mamma, I think it will be much better,' said Helen. She was grateful for the gentle consideration of her mother's tone, and understood the desire to spare her as far as possible, and not to press for a confession which it would now be painful and humiliating to make. Perhaps the love had not been very real, but it was Helen's first fancy, and it had gathered force from her very efforts to be guided by Martha's opinion or prejudices and her own better judgment. At all events, whether she truly loved Lionel Benson or no, the pang with which she heard his unworthiness proclaimed was very real and bitter.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

AMBROSE was gone. Mr. Benson very judiciously shut up Ilex Lodge, and went to town for a fortnight; and Mr. Wentworth was also there, although the clubs were thinning and the London season was near its end. It was an excellent opportunity for the inhabitants of the manor and the parsonage to resume the habits and feelings which had been so rudely disturbed; and to outward appearance this was done. Martha paid and received visits, and was busy about her improvements of the manor garden, which had been considerably neglected until she came into possession. Twice she came over to the parsonage, and one or two very businesslike letters were exchanged between her and Mr. Erle respecting the appointment of a new surgeon to Hedworth. Helen was diligent in the parish, and more than ever a slave to her brothers, who at this time came home for their summer holidays. There was great consternation among the younger members of the family at their uncle's

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sudden departure, and some curiosity as to its cause, but it did not transpire; and Mr. Erle, who always heard the gossip which was going about, was satisfied that this would not be added to Martha's other annoyances.

That Martha suffered, might be guessed from the rather defiant hardness of her manner; but her colour did not fade, and her step was quick and firm as usual. Poor Helen's efforts at stoicism were less successful; her wan looks made her mother's heart ache, and did not incline Mr. Erle to moderate his indignation against the author of the mischief. Yet she did her best to keep up a stout heart, and neither regarded herself, nor wished others to regard her, as a slighted heroine.

So the days went on, until, one Saturday afternoon, Helen heard, not from her father, but through John and Richard, that Lionel Benson had returned, bringing Mr. Wentworth with him. On the morrow, therefore, a meeting was inevitable, and it did not incline Helen to look forward to the Sunday services with much satisfaction. That she should not take her class at the school was tacitly understood; but this caution proved unnecessary, for Lionel did not make his appearance there, possibly from a

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laudable desire to spare the Sunday scholars a display of unchristian temper on the part of their rector. From Helen's usual seat among the children she could see the two gentlemen come into church, Mr. Wentworth's red or reddish head towering above that of his companion, who was of slighter make. Certainty is always more tolerable than suspense, and the knowledge that as soon as the service was over the first meeting must, in one way or another, take place, subdued Helen's nervous agitation. Quietly, and not without devotion, she went through the service, but she certainly thought her father's sermon rather longer than usual.

Martha was not there; and on this point John also had been well-informed, for he mentioned at breakfast that she had asked the nearest way across the fields to the adjacent parish of Whitchurch, intending to go there to morning service. Helen, therefore, had no refuge, except with her own family, and walked between her mother and Pippin down the aisle. But the ordeal was not yet passed, for just outside the church porch the two gentlemen stood waiting. Mrs. Erle shook hands with Richard Wentworth, and hurried on, bowing

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stiffly to his companion; and Helen in attempting to follow her example, coloured deeply, and made no inclination at all.

'Miss Erle,' said Lionel, low and reproachfully.

Helen walked on, and Pippin felt it his duty to notice such a solecism in politeness—

'Mr. Benson said something, Helen.'

'Yes, dear; never mind,' replied Helen, hurriedly. So they went on, and the parsonage gate was reached in safety. Helen went straight upstairs, sat down on her bed, and cried. Next time, she thought she should be quite hardened, and not mind it in the least.

Meanwhile Mr. Erle, on coming out of the vestry, executed precisely the same manœuvre, so that not only Lionel, but Mr. Wentworth perceived that the slight was intentional, and he asked unceremoniously—

'Why, Benson, has anything happened?'

'A good many things have happened,' replied Lionel, with a slight laugh, 'which I imagined the Erles were desirous to keep quiet.'

'What! *you* have your little interest in the neighbourhood? I admire your taste, and wish you all success.'

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'Thank you. But there is another reason for the coolness between myself and the Erles, with which you are more nearly concerned.'

'Now you are trying to pique my curiosity to demand the explanation you are burning to give.'

'Well,' said Lionel, 'after what has passed, I need not feel myself bound by any feelings of delicacy towards the Erles, and, indeed, fairness to you makes it desirable to let you behind the scenes. I don't know if you have seen young Arnold, a brother of Mrs. Erle's, who was brought down here, nominally to do a little under-paid doctoring, really to make love to the heiress. It was cleverly managed; and among them all Miss Brown was entrapped into some sort of an engagement, which was to be kept dark until such time as it could be declared with credit. However, the lady very soon repented of her bargain, and after a certain dinner at Stretton, threw it up altogether; whereat the Erles are highly indignant, and accuse me of undue interference. And so the young doctor was sold up, and has gone to try his fortune elsewhere. The young lady is not at all disconsolate, and if you like to cut in at once, the game is in your own hands.'

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Mr. Wentworth looked gloomy and displeased; for though very desirous of making his fortune by marriage, he wished to do it in as gentlemanlike a manner as possible, and his companion's tone was distasteful to him.

'Upon my word,' he said, 'this is a most extraordinary story, and quite inconsistent with my previous knowledge of the Erles. And it is not much to Miss Brown's credit, either.'

'I do not blame her,' said Lionel; 'with her large fortune, reputed to be even larger than it is, she can scarcely avoid being the prey of every sharper, until she is well and respectably married.'

'But I deny that young Arnold was a sharper, unless his appearance much belied him; and I am still more unwilling to believe that Erle would lend himself to such a discreditable scheme.'

'Well, I can only give you the facts, from which you may draw your own conclusions. Perhaps,' Lionel added, candidly, 'I spoke with too much bitterness, because it does try a man's temper to be pointedly cut by the very person in the world with whom he is most anxious to stand well.'

'Of course it is trying,' said Mr. Wentworth,

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with a laugh. 'However, let us first get to the bottom of the Brown affair. You are positive that she threw Arnold over?'

'Yes; but I repeat that she was not to blame. She was hurried into the affair, and did the best she could to retrieve the mistake. And *you* can guess who opened her eyes.'

'She certainly was uncommonly gracious that evening at Stretton.'

'Yes. In fact, people in general believe it to be a settled thing, for the other story is happily known to no one but myself and the Erles.'

'In short, you advise me to try my fate at once?'

'At once,—to-day, if you will. Sunday is a lucky day.'

'And there is no time like the present,' added Mr. Wentworth. On the strength of this aphorism, he declined to partake of the luxurious little luncheon prepared for the two gentlemen at Ilex Lodge, and walked straight on to Elwood Manor.

'This is rather a daring stroke,' thought Lionel, as he turned into his house. '*If*, in a moment of pique, she should say she will have him;—but I think we are safe enough for this

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time.' And he ate his *fillets de bœuf* with peculiar relish, while poor Helen was discovering that her flood of tears had not given her much appetite for dinner.

A visitor is a rare event in the country on a Sunday, so that Martha was quite unprepared for Mr. Wentworth's appearance. She knew that he was at Ilex Lodge, and had just decided not to go to church that afternoon, for it was a long walk to Whitchurch, and she did not choose to encounter him or Mr. Benson at Elwood. So she had retreated to the library, as a refuge from Mrs. Jenkins's small-talk, and was preparing to dream away the afternoon with a book in her hand, when Mr. Wentworth was announced.

'I am glad to have found you alone,' he said.

Then Martha knew for what business he had come, and she sat up, prepared to go through it with propriety. She was much less fluttered than Mr. Wentworth, although he was a man of some experience in the world. He really did not know how to begin, and Martha relieved his embarrassment in rather a singular manner.

'Perhaps, Mr. Wentworth, it will save us

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both some pain and annoyance if you do not object to tell me whether your desire to see me alone was prompted by Mr. Lionel Benson?'

'I come on an errand in which few men care to take advice.'

'But some men are very ready to offer it,' said Martha.

In his heart, Richard Wentworth fully admitted the truth of this assertion. He cursed Lionel's officiousness, and felt that he was doing a foolish, if not an impertinent thing. But he had gone too far to draw back, and boldly made the plunge.

'Plain words are best, Miss Brown. I have come to ask you to be my wife!'

More he might have said, but words and tones of love were still ringing in Martha's ear, which made her shrink from the professions of another as if it had been profanation. She stood up and said—

'Spare me, Mr. Wentworth. One answer every gentleman will accept as final; but a woman would rather imply than express it. I *cannot* listen to your suit.'

'You allude to some entanglement, now happily at an end,—for which you were not to blame, and which cannot alter my sentiments.'

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'I knew—I knew,' said Martha, passionately, 'that you had heard the distorted truth. But my faith is not so lightly given, or lightly broken. Let me go, Mr. Wentworth!' And she broke from him, while, in fact, he made but a slight effort to detain her.

No man likes to be rejected, still less the man who piques himself on always doing the right thing at the right moment. If Mr. Wentworth's heart was not deeply wounded, his pride was mortified, and he was angry with Lionel Benson for leading him into the scrape, so that his host did not find him very good company on that Sunday evening. But it must be supposed that Lionel's good conscience supported him, for he was pertinaciously cheerful, and full of consolatory sentiments, of which the most prominent was that—'One never knows where to have Miss Brown; but you may depend upon it that you were only premature, and will have better luck next time.'

Next morning Mr. Wentworth went wrathfully back to Dulcote, and confided the secret of his repulse to Sir Henry.

'That comes of being led by the nose by a wretched little attorney!' he said; 'and it was partly my own fault too, for I should never

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have listened to him if I had not been so confoundedly anxious to get everything settled, that I might be on the moors by the 12th. This being the 2nd, there was no time to lose.'

Mr. Wentworth thought it more honourable towards Miss Brown to say nothing of her reasons for rejecting him, or of Lionel's version of the story. It had left a disagreeable impression on his mind; but he did not wish to lower Sir Henry's esteem for his 'excellent friend,' Mr. Erle.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

'I SAY, Helen,' said John Erle, coming in from his afternoon's amusement, in a rather excited manner, 'what is this about Uncle Ambrose? It is too bad that Miss Needham should know more about my own uncle than I do myself.'

Helen looked up from her work with a pacifying smile.

'Well, Jack, it is not the first time that Miss Needham's gossip has been news to the persons most nearly concerned.'

'Yes; but I do not think that *this* is an invention, for, in fact, it is too absurd for Miss Needham to invent. First I must tell you that I went into the shop to buy fish-hooks, and in peering down into the packet she caught up one of them with her curls. I politely tried to disentangle it, and in so doing I pulled her wig awry, which, you know, was rather embarrassing; and to hide her blushes, she began to talk as fast as possible, all about Uncle Ambrose. She said that people did

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think it a great shame he should be driven away in this manner, when he was getting on so nicely; and that, after all, Miss Brown got no more than her deserts; that no young lady, however rich, ought to keep company with two gentlemen at once; and since she would not have Mr. Arnold, Mr. Wentworth would not have her. Now, I want to know if Uncle Ambrose *did* keep company with Miss Brown; and if that is the reason he has gone off in such a hurry?'

'How can you talk about people "keeping company?"' rejoined Helen, evading the question.

'Because I don't know the polite word, and it all comes to the same thing. If you will not answer me, Helen, I shall be quite sure that it is true; and, indeed, I am quite sure of it already. Miss Brown is not half so jolly as she was when we were at home at Easter; and Mark, the Elwood keeper, you know, said something yesterday which I did not understand at the time: he is a surly fellow, so I did not like to ask him, but now I know what he meant.'

'Papa would not be at all pleased if he knew that you picked up gossip from Miss Brown's own servants.'

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'I did not do it on purpose; and all I want to know is, whether it is true or false. Surely you can tell me that, Helen.'

'Like all gossip, I suppose there is a little truth mixed with a great deal of falsehood. Miss Brown has done nothing wrong.'

'And what has this new man, Mr. Benson, got to do with it? I know there is some mystery about him, since mamma told me that we were not to let him make acquaintance with us. I could have found out for myself that a man who wears such thin boots in the country is not good for much.'

'I am not going to tell you anything about it,' said Helen. 'If you want to know, you must ask papa.'

'Now, I call that unkind, Helen, when I tell you all my school stories.'

Helen was proof against importunity, and when John had discontentedly returned to his pursuits in the back yard, she went to tell her mother of the gossip rife in the village. Mr. Erle had already heard the same thing, adding, which his wife did not repeat, that it was plain enough that Mr. Benson had employed his time in industriously spreading the evil report, of which there was not a whisper before his return.

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When Helen had returned to her work, Mr. and Mrs. Erle continued the discussion.

'It is too hard on Miss Brown,' he said. 'Fancy what we should feel if our Helen's name were bandied about in this way.'

'And no one would feel it more than Miss Brown, if it came to her ears. I wish that she would go away for a time, and take Helen with her; it would be good for her, poor child.'

'Yes; she is looking wobegone,' said Mr. Erle.

'Since Mr. Benson came back, she has not liked to go outside the gates; and she was quite upset yesterday morning after he called, and was not let in. I hoped she would not know it; but either one of the children told her, or she saw him come to the door from the upper rooms.'

'He has no business to stay in the place. As you say, Amy, I suppose that decent people must be driven out of it; and I shall go and see Miss Brown before tea.'

On the way to the manor, Mr. Erle encountered Mrs. Jenkins, and her perplexed face brightened at his appearance.

'The very person I wanted to see, Mr. Erle.'

'And probably on the very business which brings me here; so turn back with me, Mrs.

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Jenkins. I want to see Miss Brown about these scandalous reports which Mr. Benson has set afloat.'

'Yes, indeed; they do say such dreadful things,' rejoined Mrs. Jenkins, twinkling away a tear, 'it makes me quite uncomfortable; and Martha does not seem to care even so much as she should do. She says she shall stay here and go on just the same as usual.'

'Well, I mean to have a talk with her,' said Mr. Erle; 'and don't you vex yourself, Mrs. Jenkins.'

A cheerful word from her infallible pope had great weight with the old lady, and she straightway took a less gloomy view of the matter.

Martha did not look cheerful, but flushed and resolute, as if prepared to defy detraction, when Mr. Erle joined her in the garden. He walked away with her into a retired alley before beginning the conversation.

'Mrs. Jenkins tells me that you have heard the slanders which are abroad.'

'Only some of them, I suppose,' said Martha; 'they probably reach me in a mitigated form.'

'They have not yet had time to grow, since they date from Benson's return to Ilex Lodge; and if you will take my advice, Miss Brown,

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you will give them ample time to die away, by leaving home for some weeks. Change will do you good.'

'Hardly, since I am perfectly well already. And I do not choose to be driven away by Lionel Benson.'

'We have to do many things which we should not choose.'

'But this is merely a matter of taste. I prefer staying quietly at home.'

'Well, Miss Brown, if you will not go for your own sake, I wish you would go for Helen's. I do not care to say much about it; but you can see that she looks harassed and out of spirits, and I should be glad to get her away. And if you take her with you, it will be a sufficient answer to one class of the accusations made against you.'

'The one I care least about. I would rather that they blamed me than *him*. You seem to have your plan cut and dried, Mr. Erle, and I have nothing to do but to assent. Where are we to go? To Scotland, or to the Lakes, or will nothing short of the Rhine satisfy you?'

'Oh, I am not going to dictate any further. *Any* change will do. Even London will be far enough, if you are not in tune for travelling.'

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'No; I could not go back to Bedford-square in the month of August. It is the fresh air which keeps me going. I tell you what I should not dislike. There is a farm in South Wales which I believe belonged to my mother—at least, it certainly was not bought with Uncle Oliver's hoardings—where I was sent as a child to recruit after the measles. It was my first taste of the country; and I remember now the kind-hearted hospitality of the farm people, the delicious cream, and the thin oat-cakes, and the old grey pony which carried me up and down the hill, while Jen picked her way daintily over the stony track, and thought it a barbarous and dangerous land. We need not take old Jen this time, but Helen and I will go down together and ruralize for six weeks.'

Martha grew quite animated in her description, and as Mr. Erle fully approved of the project, the details were soon arranged. Before they parted she had a word to say on another subject.

'I have not cared to ask Helen, Mr. Erle, for she might misunderstand, but *you* will not mind telling me whether you have heard anything from Mr. Arnold.'

'We have heard of, but not from him. Amy

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was uneasy, and made me write to his friend in Liverpool. He said that Ambrose was working hard—nobly was his expression—and of great use. I dare say he will settle there.'

Martha thanked him, and asked no more.

Very few days after this, Martha and Helen were established at Cefnagelly. It was a rather picturesque tenement, whitewashed and slated, with tall, narrow windows and a steep roof, quite in character with the surrounding landscape. The soft swelling green hills, varied by an occasional patch of heather, the sparkling streams and watercourses, give much smiling beauty to those valleys of South Wales which are as yet untarnished by the smoke of the iron furnaces, and the valley in which Cefnagelly stands is one of these.

'There is only one objection to the scheme, which is otherwise a good one,' said Martha, while they sat drinking tea in the garden on the afternoon of their arrival. 'Ill-natured people will draw a parallel between us and the two old ladies of Llangollen, and may declare that disappointment has driven us into a seclusion from which we shall return no more.'

'If we could transplant the family, I should not wish to return,' said Helen. 'I like this

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better than Elwood; and I shall write to mamma that our two cows do not give half such good cream. Who lives on that side of the valley, I wonder? It looks like a gentleman's place.'

'After all,' said Martha, 'it is *not* seclusion which gives its charm to Cefnagelly. I asked the same question while you were upstairs, but I cannot repeat the confusion of liquid consonants which stand for the name of the place. The name of the owner is Mr. Llewellyn Price Llewellyn. He lives there with his sister, but is a very neighbourly gentleman, Mrs. Morgan says, and always allows her lodgers to walk in his woods. It seems that they have lodgers at the farm every summer, who come out of Swansea to drink goats' milk and wash the copper out of their system.'

'Is that Mrs. Morgan's version?' said Helen, laughing.

'Every word of it. English being a foreign tongue to her, her language is polished and highly educated, all taken out of the dictionary. I told her not to have it supposed that we were anything but Swansea gentility, unless you are very hungry for society, Helen.'

'Why should you think so?' said Helen,

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quite injured by the insinuation. The inquiry about the owner of that pretty hanging wood had been prompted by a purely disinterested desire for information.

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CHAPTER XXV.

THE pleasant out-of-door life at Cefnagelly brought back Helen's colour, while Martha recovered some of the spirits which she professed never to have lost. They spoke not at all, and thought as little as possible, of the events of the last few months, and to one page of that history Helen at least was resolved never to turn back. The feverish and doubtful pleasure which Lionel's attentions had sometimes afforded her was over, the charm was broken, and she felt assured that even the renewal of intimacy would not alter her present feelings towards him. All that remained was to forget the disagreeable episode as quickly as possible.

Mr. Erle, missing his daughter grievously, was her most frequent correspondent, and kept her fully informed in all village news, and one passage in his letters gave Helen a little uneasiness. 'Benson has shut up Ilex Lodge and gone to town,' he wrote; 'he discharged the two servants with a month's wages, and

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has put in an old woman to take care of it, so I suppose he does not mean to come back this season. I do not really anticipate that he will find his way down to Wales; but of course he will have no difficulty in ascertaining Miss Brown's address at the post-office. Should he appear, write instantly, or telegraph, and I will put an end to such persecution.'

Unwilling to disturb Martha, perhaps also shrinking from any trenchant remark on the subject, Helen suppressed this intelligence, but for some days she forbore to walk out alone, and even when they were together, would look nervously round on the solitary hill-side. No one came to disturb their seclusion, and the impression soon faded; so one afternoon, when Martha professed herself tired by the morning's ride and disinclined for further exercise, Helen set forth fearlessly to explore Mr. Llewellyn's woods. She crossed the hollow lane which divided his property from the Cefnagelly farm, and found such a pleasant knoll just within the paling, that she was not inclined to wander further, and seated herself at once on the mossy turf. She had brought Tennyson's poems with her; for Martha, who was fond of poetry, was endeavouring to educate the same

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taste in Helen, and the well-worn green cover, spotted and faded, betrayed how often the volume had been her companion on a long summer's afternoon, during the visits to Margate or Brighton, in her uncle's lifetime.

Helen turned over the pages, looking with interest at the lines which Martha had underscored, and well pleased when she could imagine any reference to her uncle Ambrose in the emphasis. Then she picked out the pieces which contained a story, and read them without much regard either to the versification or the sentiment; and she was becoming quite absorbed in the love passages between William and Dora, when the sound of footsteps in the lane made her look up, not quickly, but with the lazy curiosity which might be excited by the expectation of seeing Farmer Morgan or his shepherd on the way up to the farm.

Her mood was changed, and she sprang up, startled and afraid, when Lionel Benson leaped over the stile and stood by her side. Of course she recognised him, yet he was very unlike the spruce, polished gentleman who had striven, only too successfully, to captivate her fancy: he looked miserably ill, worn,

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and haggard, with dark lines under his eyes, and a nervous twitching of the mouth.

'You don't seem to know me, Miss Erle?'

'Yes, I know you,' said Helen, faintly. She began to think that he had been drinking, and was the more anxious to escape without exasperating him. There he stood, with one hand upon the stile, to bar her passage, and she knew how slender was the chance of rescue from any person passing along that unfrequented lane.

'I saw you and Miss Brown come home on your ponies at two o'clock, and watched for you to come out again. Fortune has favoured me, and I could not have chosen a pleasanter and more romantic spot for a declaration of love. Will you not sit down, Helen? I see that standing fatigues you.'

Helen, who was trembling in every limb, replied, with all the dignity of which she was mistress—'Be so good as to let me pass, Mr. Benson; I wish to go home.'

'You are terrified. Why should you fear me, who am ready to dare all for your love? Hear me now, for time presses. I am about to leave this country for years, perhaps for life, and a mad, irresistible impulse to take you

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with me must not be gainsaid. I have a gig waiting at the wayside inn, not a quarter of a mile from hence. Come with me now, and in a few hours we shall be beyond the reach of pursuit. I cannot waste time in professions of love for which there will be time hereafter; and when you know what I am risking, you will doubt no more.'

His strange, dark words and vehement manner increased Helen's terror even to agony, and as she cast a despairing glance around she saw a man on horseback coming over the brow of the hill and across the field. She waved her handkerchief, and no distressed damsel in the days of chivalry ever received a more prompt response to her signal, for the rider galloped down the slope and into the cover before Lionel, who leaned against the stile with folded arms and downcast eyes, awaiting Helen's reply, perceived his approach. It was not yet too late to escape, and this seemed to be Lionel's first intention; but he changed his purpose and maintained his position; while Helen, now that the danger was past, sank breathlessly on the turf. The young man, whom she recognised as Mr. Llewellyn, had thrown the reins on his pony's neck, and hastily dismounted; he laid

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his hand on Lionel's shoulder, and asked roughly what he was about.

Lionel drew himself up as a gentle protest against the indignity, and replied with the old suave manner of which Helen had as yet seen no trace.

'Excuse me, if I am trespassing; but I came in to speak to Miss Erle.'

'Do you know him?' Mr. Llewellyn asked, turning to Helen in some perplexity.

'Yes; I did know him at home,' replied Helen, in a low voice.

'I will not detain you,' continued Lionel; 'for I myself have no time to lose if I am to catch the train.' He bowed to Helen, and passed quietly over the stile, not quickening his pace until he was in the lane.

Then Helen gave way to the weakness to which she and other young people are so unfortunately prone, and began to cry rather hysterically, which was embarrassing to her deliverer.

'Ought I to have let him go? If the fellow insulted you, I can run after him and knock him down, or, if you like it better, I will set the police on him.'

In her anxiety to reject these suggestions,

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Helen was able to check her sobs and speak coherently.

'No, thank you; he frightened me a little, that was all, and it was very good of you to come so fast.'

'Not at all; but it was a great piece of luck that I was in the way. The fact is, I saw the fellow lurking about this morning, and thought he was after no good—coming to plan a railway through the valley, or something of that sort. So I said I would ride down after luncheon, and warn him off if I saw him again. You are quite sure that I had better not ride after him?'

'Quite sure,' repeated Helen. 'If you will be so *very* kind as to go with me up to Cefnagelly, it is all I want.'

Mr. Llewellyn accepted the charge with great alacrity: he and Helen had known each other by sight for some time, since they had met in the course of their rides and walks; and this adventure seemed to make them acquainted without further introduction. He was a lithe, active young man—a thorough Welshman in look, with his brown eyes, ruddy colouring, and glossy black hair; nor was he without a trace of the fiery temper which is also said to be a Welsh characteristic.

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The sagacious pony was left with a rein buckled to the stile, to crop the grass and await his master's return, while he and Helen slowly ascended the steep hill to the farm. She still felt faint and breathless; and every time she was forced to pause, Mr. Llewellyn expressed compunction for having allowed Lionel Benson to escape so easily.

'He put on the airs of a gentleman; it was that which made it so difficult to deal with him.'

'It was better to let him go; I do not think there is the least chance of his coming back.'

'Oh! if you are at all uneasy, Miss Erle, I will send my keeper and half-a-dozen men to patrol the house all night.'

Helen disclaimed the offer, but was not less sensible of the goodwill which prompted it; and she did not look displeased when Mr. Llewellyn added that he should bring his sister to call next day, and intended to inquire himself that evening whether she had perfectly recovered from her alarm. They did not part until they reached the precincts of the farm; and young Llewellyn returned to relate his adventure to the half-sister who was looking after his comforts at Bargelly, until such time as he made a home for himself.

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'That really *is* curious!' said Miss Price; 'I was so anxious for you to come back to tell you that I have found out the history of those two girls. They are not Swansea people, as we supposed; but the darker one is Miss Brown herself, who owns Cefnagelly, and is so fabulously rich.'

'Oh! I thought Miss Erle did not look like a Welsh woman.'

'But about Miss Brown, Llewellyn. We will certainly call to-morrow, and ask them to dinner. Here is a chance for you to become the greatest squire of these parts.'

'What an absurd idea!' said the young man. 'As if any one would marry Miss Brown: she is as old as the hills, and not so well looking. She only answers one good purpose in life, and that is to serve as a foil to that lovely girl. I have thought so every time I met them together.'

'Really, Llewellyn,' replied the elder sister, 'I hoped you were growing too old for this absurd habit of falling in love.'

'I never was in love in my life,' said Llewellyn, walking hastily out of the room, before his sister could begin to recount former transitory passions.

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Helen told Martha of every word which had been exchanged between herself and Lionel Benson, not without remorse for having suppressed her father's caution. She was less communicative about Mr. Llewellyn's share in the transaction, although it was unnecessary to be guarded in her account, while Martha's attention was riveted on the chief actor.

'Certainly,' she said, 'what you describe of Lionel's words and manner is unlike anything I ever saw in him. It was like the act of a desperate man.'

'He looked desperate!' said Helen.

'Love cannot have driven him wild, though I really believe that he cared for you, Helen.'

'Do not say so,' replied Helen; 'it makes me shiver to think that I once cared, ever so little, for him.'

'We shall hear of him again—but you need not look scared. I do not expect to see him, for it is plain enough that he is flying the country in some desperate scrape. After all, I am sorry for his father, who has all his life made an idol of respectability.'

'I was so afraid of fainting,' said Helen, her terrors renewed, as she recalled the scene; 'and especially in those few moments when

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Mr. Llewellyn was riding down the slope;—though *then* the danger was past.'

'Yes: it was a most opportune rescue. Only I wonder that Mr. Llewellyn let him off so easily.'

'That made it less disagreeable for me; but I think it was Mr. Benson's wonderful acting which saved him; he recovered his natural manner in a moment, and spoke so coolly, that Mr. Llewellyn did not know what to think.'

'"His natural manner,"' as you call it,' said Martha, 'is only the mask which he has worn for so many years that it has become habitual. I have always believed that there was some great mystery to conceal; and now, perhaps, we shall know what it is. You had better write a line to your father, Helen, but without frightening them by making too much of the adventure.'

And Helen was glad enough to follow her advice.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. LLEWELLYN and his sister, Miss Price—for, as he explained, she was only a half-sister—made an early visit to Cefnagelly on the following morning. The lapse of ten days had moderated that morose desire for solitude which Martha had expressed on their first arrival. She was more sensible than Helen of the stagnation of ideas which creeps over the feminine mind when it is debarred from the society of mankind, and thus she found young Llewellyn's vigorous, rather bucolic talk not unrefreshing. When the subjects of Welsh mutton, goats'-milk cheeses, and other articles of home produce, had been properly discussed, he had no objection to take a wider range, even extending to some foreign news in which Helen could not be induced to take an interest. She could talk of Whig and Tory politics as fluently as most young ladies, but when it came to the Reactionary and Progressive parties in Germany, her attention flagged.

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Llewellyn, on his side, candidly admitted that Miss Brown was neither so old nor so ill-looking as he had before imagined; 'but though I say this, Jane, you must not suppose that I have altered my opinion about Miss Erle, except to think her more lovely than ever, now I see her without her hat.'

'She is certainly pretty,' said poor Jane, with as much cordiality as she could assume. It was not agreeable to contemplate the possibility of making way for the young lady whom she supposed to be Miss Brown's humble companion, although she might have abdicated gracefully in favour of the rich Miss Brown herself.

This new acquaintance pleasantly diversified the time which might otherwise have been employed in speculations about Lionel Benson. With Mr. Llewellyn for a protector, and Miss Price for a chaperone, Martha and Helen were not afraid to take a wider range of the hills than usual, and they returned to drink tea at Bargelly, in order, as Llewellyn said, that they might compare the produce of two rival dairies. He escorted the young ladies home in the dusk of the evening, and planned an expedition for the morrow.

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The morrow, however, brought other work to do. Helen was dressed, but had not left her room when the maid brought up a little pencil note, adding that the gentleman who brought it was waiting to see her. Her first impulse was to replace the note in the servant's hand, refusing even to open it, but a second glance assured her that the writing, though familiar, was not that of Mr. Benson. She then took and read a few hurried lines from Ambrose, entreating her to come down and speak to him *at once*, and Helen lost no time in obeying the summons.

'Why have you come, Uncle Ambrose?' she said, hastily entering their little sitting-room.

'Not for the object you imagine; do not suppose I intend to annoy Miss Brown. I felt it right to warn her that there is some villany abroad, though I fear that the warning comes too late to be of use.'

Martha, who had learned from her maid of the arrival of a strange gentleman, had also hurried down to shield Helen against the supposed annoyance, and now stood in the doorway, inclined to retreat as soon as she heard the well-known voice of Ambrose. But pride prompted a different course, and she advanced

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to greet him with the courtesy due to an ordinary acquaintance.

'I was just going to epxlain the apparent impertinence of my intrusion,' said Ambrose, with some agitation; 'would you prefer my telling Helen apart, or can you bear to listen to me?'

'I had better hear what you have to say if it concerns myself.'

'It does concern you, though my story will appear a vague one. I have been in Liverpool, visiting the poorer population gathered near the docks, and lodging in the same neighbourhood. Yesterday I was sent for to see a poor fellow who had injured himself severely by falling down the hold of a clipper just starting for Geelong. The ship had already left the dock, and I went off in a boat, and decided on the expediency of having him brought ashore. While on deck, making arrangements with the captain, we were standing beside the open skylight of the saloon, and on looking down, I saw an elderly man playing draughts with another passenger. I thought I knew the man's face, and presently recollected the elder Mr. Benson, whom I saw that day we went to look at Ilex Lodge. It was like and yet not like him, for

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he had shaved off his grey whiskers, and wore a brown wig. I asked the captain the man's name; he was not sure, but thought it was Edwardes, and appealed to the clerk, who looked at his list, and said, "Yes, William Edwardes." I hardly knew what to think, and only observed that I seemed to know his face. At this moment another boat came up to the ship's side, and in the man who sprang on board I recognised Lionel Benson. He also had shaved off his whiskers and changed his usual style of dress, but in him I could not be mistaken; he did not see me at first, and exclaimed triumphantly as soon as he touched the deck, "That was a near thing; I thought I had lost my passage." He had a little parley with the clerk in giving up his ticket, and then I stepped forward and said, "Mr. Benson." He changed colour, but recovered himself in a moment, and looking me full in the face, as if he did not know me, he said, "I beg your pardon," and walked on, presently disappearing down the companion-stair. I asked the clerk for his ticket, which was made out for Ambrose Brown.'

'Well,' said Martha, interrupting him with a smile; 'that was cool, certainly.'

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'I told the captain that was not the man's name, that I could swear to him as Lionel Benson. He shrugged his shoulders, and said that it was very likely, since they had almost always passengers under wrong names; but it was no business of his or of mine, unless I had a warrant out against him. I asked him to detain the ship while I communicated with the police, but this he positively refused to do; he said that he had lost more time than he could spare, owing to this accident, and must be off with the ebb tide. And, in fact, it would have been of no use, for as soon as I had got my patient into the hospital, I went to the police office, and found that they had received no instructions.'

'You are quite sure that it was Mr. Benson, senior, who was playing draughts in the cabin?' said Martha.

'Quite sure. I looked at him again after the son came on board, and saw the sharply-cut, rather open nostril and thin lips, which I noticed as the peculiarity of his face that day I saw him.'

'Then,' said Martha, 'nothing remains but to wish Mr. William Edwardes and Mr. Ambrose Brown a prosperous career in the New World.'

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'You know what it means?' said Ambrose, looking at her in some uncertainty, whether she was trying to brave it out.

'I guess what it means; that, having made ducks and drakes of all the money on which they could lay hands, they are going to start afresh with as much of the spoil as they can carry with them. Poor Uncle Oliver! I think the shock of discovering the Bensons to be swindlers would have been even greater than that of losing all his hardly earned wealth.'

'Something, I hope, will be saved out of the wreck,' said Ambrose.

'Perhaps. At all events, I know that these two farms were always in the hands of the local agent; and so, after all, Helen, we may retire here, like the two old ladies of Llangollen, to enjoy a romantic friendship, and farm our own land with the help of Mr. Llewellyn's advice.'

This familiar mention of a Mr. Llewellyn did not tend to raise Ambrose's spirits. He was bitterly conscious that he had forfeited all right to shield Martha in the present emergency, and he remained silent and ill at ease until she spoke again.

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'Did you travel all night to tell me this, Mr. Arnold?'

'Yes; I came off by the first train.'

'And what do you advise me to do next? Shall we telegraph to Mr. Erle to make inquiries in London?'

It was pleasant to be asked for advice, and Ambrose answered, cheerfully,—'If you will trust me, I can go to town myself; it is certain that any lawyer who takes the matter in hand will wish to hear my evidence.'

So it was settled, after some demur about his undertaking another journey that day. Ambrose was, in truth, impatient to be gone, yet not unwilling to undertake a charge which must oblige him to have some communication with Martha by letter or in person. Helen, who had listened and said little through all this disclosure, with difficulty induced him to drink the cup of tea she had prepared, and then he drove off to catch the first train for London.

'And now,' said Martha, 'let us eat our breakfast on economical principles. Honey and new-laid eggs are certainly an extravagance; but what about sugar? do you think I may take one lump?'

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'I do not understand you in the least,' said Helen, rather tearfully. Possibly she was more overset by the business-like relations of the two former lovers, than by Martha's levity on her loss of fortune.

'You think I speak in bravado,' said Martha; 'but why should I vex myself at the prospect of being left with three or four hundred a-year instead of fifteen or twenty thousand pounds, at whichever sum Uncle Oliver used to estimate our income. Of course I shall not be the only sufferer, and to husbands who wake up to see their wives and children beggared, and to widows who lose the little pittance which stands between them and starvation, the shock must be terrible; but I am alone in the world, and though this change of fortune comes too late to do me any good, it can scarcely do me much harm.'

Helen understood the allusion to her uncle's intolerance of Martha's riches, and still hoped the change might *not* be too late.

'Where can all the money be gone, I wonder?' she said.

'Part of it has, I have no doubt, gone to Geelong, or wherever they intend to live; and a good deal has been sunk in reckless and un-

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successful speculations. It must have been the failure of one of these which made exposure inevitable, and obliged them to fly the country.'

'You talk as if you knew all about it, Martha.'

'Because I remember hearing of more than one such affair in my uncle's lifetime, and also hearing Mr. Benson express his virtuous indignation at the same. I always disliked and distrusted him, but never suspected his honesty.'

'What a life of suspicion they must have led?'

'Yes—always on the brink of discovery. And now it is easy to understand their game, which was to prevent my marrying at all, since any inquiry about settlements might have brought on the catastrophe. And, by the way, it would have put Mr. Wentworth in an awkward position, if I had accepted his obliging offer of three weeks ago; it would have wounded his gentlemanlike feelings to explain to all the world that he had only intended to marry an heiress; and the alternative of keeping his word would have been still more distressing.'

'Mr. Wentworth *did* propose to you, then?'

'Yes—at Lionel Benson's instigation, who of course knew what the answer would be. I

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thought every one had heard of that, or I should have said nothing.'

'Every one talked about it, but I did not know if it was true.'

'Well,' said Martha, 'the ill-natured stories will be forgotten in this new excitement. But I shall not mind discovering that I can no longer afford to live at Elwood, for I think the life at Cefnagelly will be pleasanter!'

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CHAPTER XXVII.

MARTHA wrote to decline the engagement to ride with Mr. Llewellyn and his sister, since they were unwilling to go far from home; and they rejoiced in their caution, when, early in the afternoon, Mr. Erle made his appearance.

'I dare say,' he said, 'that you imagine me to have set off on receiving Helen's letter about that fellow Benson, and indeed it might have brought me; but I come on more important business.'

'Well,' said Martha, 'is it known in London that they have absconded?'

'You know it already?' said Mr. Erle, regarding her with some astonishment: she had lost the harassed, careworn expression which had grieved him when they parted, and looked cheerful and contented.

'Yes; Ambrose—Mr. Arnold,' Martha caught up the more familiar word with a blush, 'brought us the great news this morning, and he knows more about it than any one, for he saw them sail.'

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'Well,' said Mr. Erle, half laughing, half provoked, 'ever since I left home, I have been distressing myself how to break it to you, and my trouble has been thrown away, since you do not seem to take it to heart.'

'Not very much; but we feel a proper curiosity to hear all particulars. What is known in London?'

'I can hardly tell you. Trelawney came to me last night, to say that he had seen one of Benson's clients, who had come down to ascertain what was known of the father and son at Ilex Lodge. The London office was closed, the clerks had disappeared as well as their masters, and the books were therefore not forthcoming; but there can be no doubt that there is something grievously wrong. Trelawney offered to go to town, to find out what he could, while I came off here. Some one must be empowered to act for you.'

'Oh! Mr. Arnold has gone to town for that purpose,' said Martha.

His share in the transaction, and Martha's composure in alluding to it, perplexed Mr. Erle; and he could only hope to satisfy his curiosity by inquiring what Ambrose knew of the Bensons' flight. Helen told this part of

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the story, to which Martha listened with great satisfaction, correcting her when she varied in the smallest particular from the report given by Ambrose.

'Well,' said Mr. Erle, emphatically, 'it is a bad story, and I wish them joy of their ill-gotten gains. I hope you are prepared for the worst, Miss Brown; for I fear that little or nothing will be saved out of the fire. It is most unfortunate that your money was all invested in shares, instead of land.'

'I do not look on that as a piece of ill fortune,' replied Martha; 'for I am now convinced that it was part of the original scheme of fraud. My uncle was not aware how much he was influenced by Mr. Benson in all business matters; and what people called a whim of his own was no doubt a suggestion of the attorney's, to give greater facility for plunder. It is a great comfort to know that old Jen took her legacy out of his hands to invest in an annuity, on which she may retire to live in comparative affluence; and Helen and I intend to set up our staff here, and learn farming from Mr. Llewellyn.'

'And who is this Mr. Llewellyn, who made his first appearance in Helen's letter of yesterday?'

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Helen had gone into the kitchen to speak to Mrs. Morgan about providing a mutton chop for her father's tea, and preparing a room for him to sleep in, so that Martha's answer was fuller than it might otherwise have been.

'Mr. Llewellyn is an estimable young man, with a small property, who admires your daughter, Mr. Erle. As it is only a two days' acquaintance, it would be premature to say more.'

'We have had too much of that sort of thing already,' said Mr. Erle. 'I shall send for Mrs. Jenkins to keep you company, and take Helen home with me.'

'Indeed, you shall not. A ruined heiress must be indulged—at all events, until her ruin is confirmed; and I must keep Helen to sustain my spirits until the suspense is over.'

'It seems to me,' said Mr. Erle, 'that your spirits are irrationally good.'

The next morning brought a letter from Ambrose, very unlike those which Martha had formerly received from him, and yet it was not displeasing to her. Although the style was guarded and restrained, she did not think it cold; and after a more earnest perusal than the scanty information which it contained might

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seem to deserve, the substance, but not the words, was communicated to Helen and her father.

In fact, nothing was known on that day, nor for many days afterwards. Papers had been destroyed or falsified, and everything was done to leave the affairs of the office in wilful and hopeless confusion; and when, by a long and patient investigation, the mist was cleared away, it was only to reveal a gigantic and successful scheme of fraud. When it became evident to father and son that exposure was imminent, everything of which money could be made had been gambled away; and as the twofold position of trustees and solicitors placed Martha's fortune absolutely in their power, her ruin was more complete than that of any of their other clients. All the riches which had been amassed by Oliver Brown in the course of a long and prosperous life were swept away; but by the sale of furniture and the calling-in of some outstanding accounts, it was thought that the sum of six or seven thousand pounds might be secured to his niece, in addition to these two Welsh farms, with which, as she had said, the Bensons had no concern.

When all was told, Martha's stout heart

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began to fail. Mrs. Jenkins's legacy was safe, but the pensions to her uncle's old servants, and to the clerk who had served him faithfully for fifty years, were swallowed up in the general ruin; and the difficulty of renewing them at all, the impossibility of doing so on any liberal scale, brought home to her the real pinch of poverty. The question as to her future life was also harassing; and while still clinging to the scheme of settling at Cefnagelly, she could not refuse the offer, which Mr. and Mrs. Erle repeated with such friendly warmth, that she should for some months make her home with them at the parsonage.

While everything was in suspense, however, Martha preferred the solitude and retirement of her farm-house; and as Mr. Erle, after two days' acquaintance with Mr. Llewellyn, was induced to modify the intention of acting the part of a stern parent, Helen remained as her companion. Every day, and often twice a day, there was a meeting between the inmates of these two houses in the valley; but to Martha, at all events, this intercourse with the Llewellyns was a very secondary interest. The correspondence with Ambrose made post-time the turning-point of the day,—not from any fluctuation of

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hope or fear because it was supposed that at one time more, at another less of her fortune could be retrieved, but simply because the sight of his handwriting made her heart leap; and even the conventional ending of 'Yours always,' or 'Ever faithfully yours,' could be construed into a deeper meaning. Ambrose showed no romantic inclination to let the riches go, which he had so often deplored as a misfortune to their possessor, but threw all his energies into the task of securing what he could; and he evinced a capacity for business for which, as it had never been apparent in the conduct of his own affairs, none of his friends had given him credit. Next to the letters of Ambrose himself, Martha treasured up the commendations which Mr. Erle bestowed in his letters to Helen, on this new development of character.

The late summer had faded into autumn before the final result of the investigation was known, and the accounts wound up, so far as was practicable, while the two Bensons were still at large. Since the return to Elwood had only been deferred until everything was settled, and Ambrose had written that this was now the case, and that he intended to leave town on the following day, Martha felt that there was

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no further excuse for lingering at Cefnagelly, and she permitted Helen to write to her mother, giving only one day's notice of their intention 'to go home,' as Helen said, the word awakening a rather dreary echo in Martha's breast.

The letter was no sooner despatched than Helen began to prepare for their departure, for Martha had parted with her maid, and the folding of dresses and packing of books could not be entrusted to the rough country girl who served as Mrs. Morgan's handmaid in the dairy and the kitchen.

Martha, when she found Helen busy among the open boxes, wished to take her part, but she was soon checked by an anxious entreaty.

'Oh, Martha, do please let me fold up that dress. You are quite ruining it; and since you say that you never mean to buy any more good gowns, you ought to take care of those you have.'

'I thought I was doing it very tidily.'

'Indeed, you were not. There is an art in folding which you will never acquire. I like packing, and I think I shall get on better if you will go out for a walk, for there is not too much space.'

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Martha did not at once comply with this polite hint, but stood watching the movement of Helen's deft fingers.

'You set about it with spirit, Helen, as if you were quite pleased to leave Cefnagelly.'

'I think I am pleased. I have been very happy here, but I never was so long away from home before; and I dare say I shall come back some day.'

'I dare say you will—to one side of the valley or the other.'

Helen coloured, and thought the retort rather unfair. There was no doubt that Llewellyn's attentions had become very marked, and that they were not disagreeable to her, and he had intimated an intention of following her to Elwood, where everything might be arranged in a more decorous and proper manner under the paternal roof. So there was no reason why she *should* dislike going home.

'I am sorry to go,' resumed Martha. 'It has been a pleasant resting-place from the worries of life. I shall go and take leave of my old haunts this afternoon, if you really do not want me, Helen.'

Helen was clear on that point, and Martha set out alone, to indulge in a mood of not un-

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pleasing melancholy, with which the scene around her was in harmony: for it was a still, sad November day, the trees were bare, and the fading tints of the fern clothed the hill-side with russet. Martha seated herself on a tuft of moss under the shelter of a dry-stone wall, and began to live over again the events of the last few months. She smiled with a sort of scorn at the hollowness of her own professions, to remember how she had railed at the fortune which was to make her a rich woman, little dreaming that the hardly-earned wealth was already melting like a snow-ball, and that within a year her chief support should be the little property of which Oliver Brown had thought so slightingly when his nephew and heir chose for his wife the daughter of a poor Welsh yeoman. It was not the prospect of poverty, or comparative poverty, which now depressed her, so much as a blank, desolate feeling that the common interest which she had for some weeks shared with Ambrose was at an end. The interchange of letters, more frequent than perhaps was absolutely necessary, the respect and tenderness on his side, the frank confidence on hers, had brought them very near together, although without the

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faintest reference to their brief engagement. It was over now. He might return to his laborious and under-paid work among the Liverpool poor; and she, when the visit to the Erles was ended, must begin life afresh at Cefnagelly, and endeavour to stifle in the zest of new pursuits the heart-sickness which now consumed her.

The picture was not a bright one, and Martha's eyes were dimmed with unwonted tears, when she was startled by approaching steps. She looked up, and saw Ambrose by her side.

'Helen advised me to come here in search of you,' he said, deprecating her displeasure. 'But you, too, look surprised to see me.'

'You did not say that you were coming.'

'I thought that you would understand—that you would expect me,' said Ambrose, looking hurt.

'No; I did not expect, but I *wished* to see you,—to thank you for all that you have done for me.'

'I do not want thanks, especially since my endeavours have been to little purpose. But there are one or two matters of business which I thought it better to explain in person.'

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'Very well,' said Martha, hurt in her turn by the chilling word. The promised explanation did not follow—at least, not at that time. They walked on for a few paces, and then Ambrose broke forth with more of his old impetuosity than he would willingly have betrayed.

'That was not my only motive. I could not return to dreary exile without seeing you once more. While working for you, I did not feel so wholly estranged from your presence.'

'It was a voluntary exile, Mr. Arnold,' said Martha, permitting herself one word of reproach for the manner in which their engagement had been broken off.

'And therefore a wrong beyond forgiveness?'

'Remember,' said Martha, trying to smile, 'that you have as yet expressed no wish to take back your word.'

'You know what I wish, and do not dare to ask.'

Martha silently placed her hand in his; and thus the compact was resumed, not without a diffident joy on the part of Ambrose.

'Do you not fear to trust me once more with this hand, Martha?'

'No,' Martha said, again smiling. 'I think

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you will be able to put up with me, now that I am no longer an heiress.'

'You must remember,' rejoined Ambrose, 'that the money is, even now, all on your side. But if you had twenty times as much, I should still proclaim our engagement before all the world with joy and pride.'

From many men this might have appeared an equivocal sentiment, but Martha could appreciate its force. For him, as for her, all difference in outward circumstances was lost in the joy of this reunion.

Helen, with that love of match-making against which her mother had warned her, had encouraged Ambrose by her first greeting to retrieve his former error; and thus his intention of making this visit a mere matter of business had been put to flight. Anxiously watching from the parlour window, she saw and was satisfied of the success of her mission, for the two came up the garden walk, conversing with the happy assurance of lovers who had been long engaged, and only estranged by a slight misunderstanding. And, in fact, after the lapse of a few years, Ambrose was so firmly convinced that this was the case, that he resented any insinuation to the contrary as

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a gross exaggeration. Of such trifles a woman's memory is more tenacious, but Martha seldom cared to see him right on this point.

Three months afterwards, on a frosty day in mid-winter, the little church on the brow of the hill above Cefnagelly made known to the world, as distinctly as an infirm peal of bells would permit, that two bridal pairs were coming into the parish. The romantic friendship for Martha which Helen had at one time thought so impossible, led her to insist, not only that they should be married on the same day, but that they should arrive together at their respective homes in the valley. She had not indeed stipulated that they should in the interval take the same tour in company, and on that point even so devoted a lover as Llewellyn might have proved impracticable. But within a month from the double wedding, there was a joyous meeting at Bargelly, in the drawing-room which it had been Miss Price's care to re-furnish for the occasion.

While the young wives compared the relative merits of Dover and Torquay, and discovered that in both places there had been a good deal to endure from smoky chimneys, shutterless

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windows, and all the other drawbacks to seaside lodgings in December, Ambrose and Llewellyn were engaged in more practical talk about farming-stock and the rotation of crops: for Ambrose had finally abandoned the profession of medicine, and he and Martha were to settle down in the old house of Cefnagelly, to farm their own land under Llewellyn's instruction.

'With Martha to pull him up when he becomes too experimental, I dare say Ambrose will do very well,' Mr. Erle said.

Certainly, if Lionel Benson had seen Martha and Helen that evening, he might have congratulated himself for having, with the best intentions, exercised no malignant influence on their destiny.

THE END.

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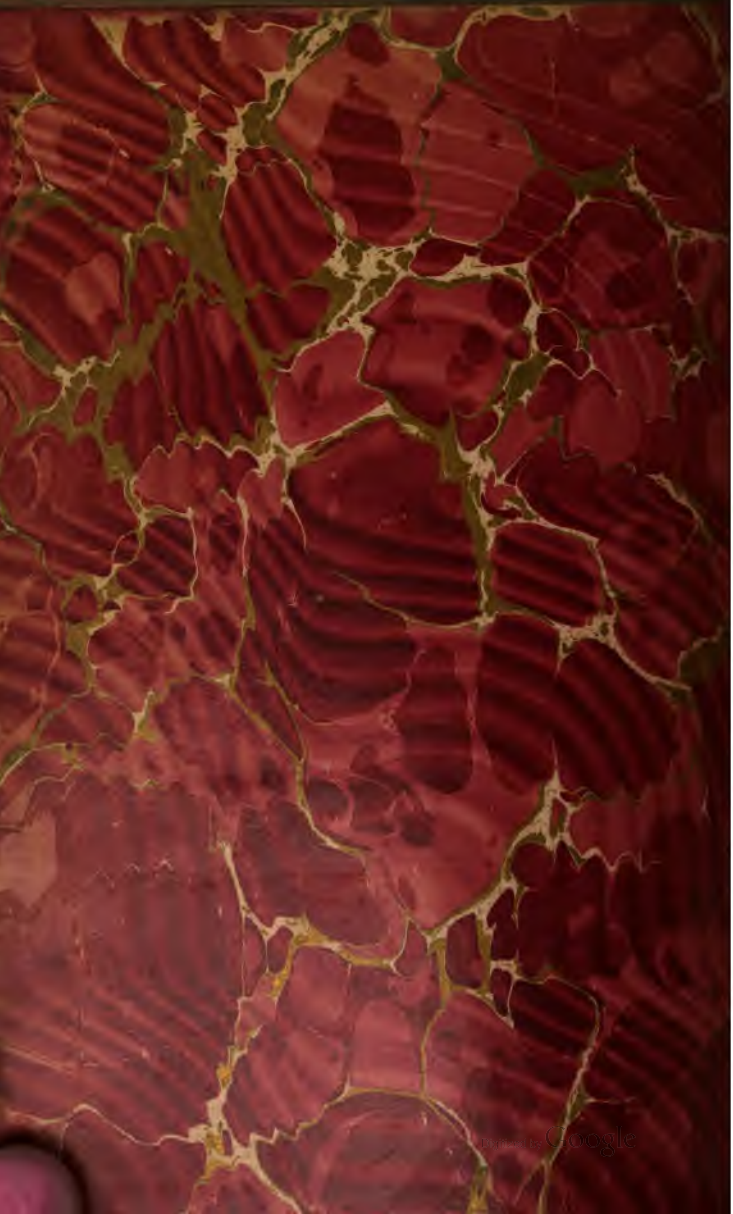

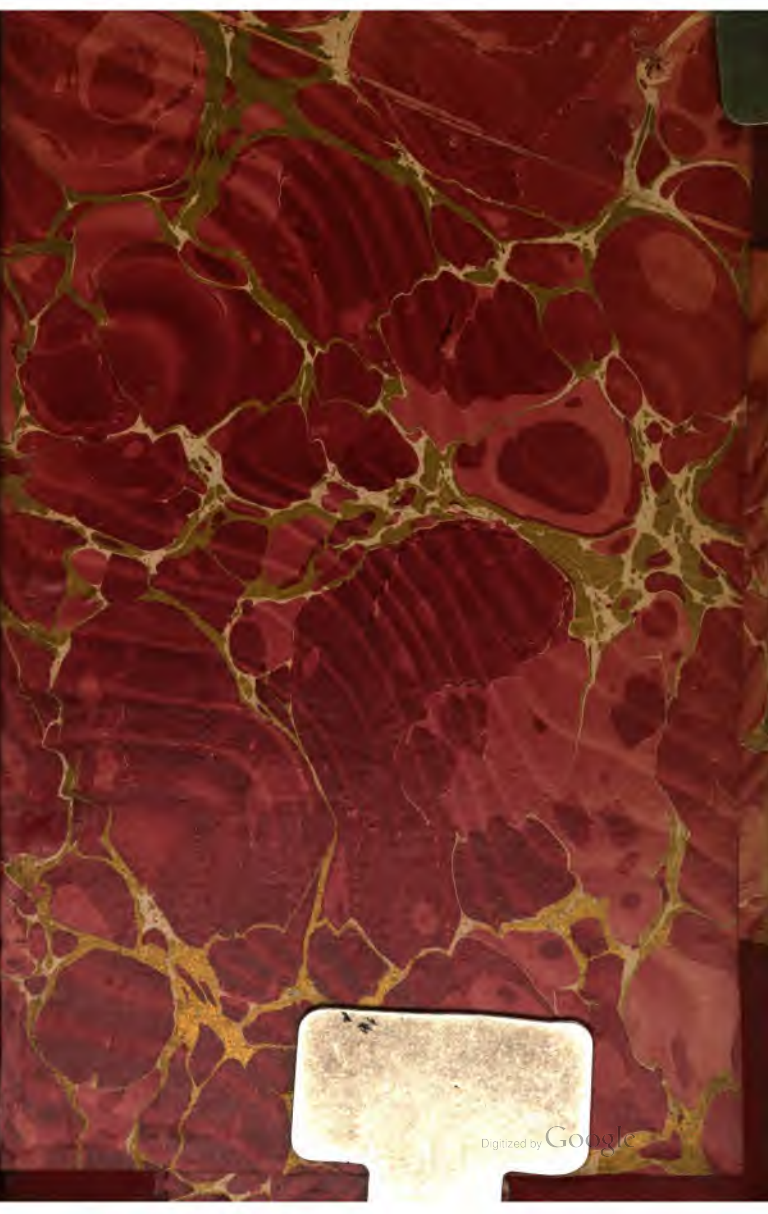
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